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THESIS

THE NEUCHÂTEL AFFAIR

by

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June 1996

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## THE NEUCHÂTEL AFFAIR

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

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from the

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis, a historical case study, focuses on the conflict between Prussia and Switzerland in the middle of the nineteenth century. Specifically, the thesis examines the sources of the struggle, political developments during its course, and the military measures taken by both sides, including the operational plans for what might well have been a major war.

Through this conflict, one can observe that the Concert of Europe, established after the defeat of Napoléon, was no longer functioning as it did in 1815 and immediately after. Since the Congress of Vienna in 1815, Neuchâtel was simultaneously a Prussian Principality and a Swiss canton.

In the face of Prussian efforts to resolve this ambiguity by force, the Swiss presented a common front, setting aside the lingering divisions of the Sonderbund War (the Swiss Civil War) from a few years before. In addition to the fact that they were able to re-unite in the presence of a common foe, the Swiss impressed the Great Powers with their determination to defend themselves. The Swiss action during the Neuchâtel Affair was arguably a major factor behind the continued respect for Switzerland's neutrality by the Great Powers.





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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This thesis, a historical case study, focuses on a conflict that arose between Prussia and Switzerland in the middle of the nineteenth century. It examines the sources of the struggle, the political developments during its course, and the military measures taken by both sides, including the operational plans for what might well have become a major war.

In 1856-67, Switzerland and Prussia were on the verge of an armed conflict. The ambiguous situation of Neuchâtel, simultaneously a Swiss canton and a Prussian Principality, was the cause of trouble. Two political systems opposed each other: Swiss radicalism and Prussian monarchism. This opposition came to a head within the microcosm of Neuchâtel. In 1848 the republicans seized power in the name of liberty and equality. Pro-Prussian royalists led a coup in 1856, which failed lamentably. When the leaders were taken prisoner; King Frederick William IV of Prussia called for their unconditional release and for the re-establishment of his "legitimate rights over the Principality." He tried to muster the support of the Concert of Europe to reach a diplomatic solution to the conflict, for the most part without success.

The Great Powers, with the exception of Great Britain, disliked the Swiss political system. Yet they all agreed that Prussia should not be allowed to increase its power. The perpetual neutrality of Switzerland served the interests of Europe--the important Swiss lines of communication were not in the hands of a rival power. At the time, the Concert of Europe was not functioning as smoothly as it had in 1815 and the period immediately afterward, owing to the revival of traditional rivalries among France, Prussia, Austria, and Russia.

Frederick William realized that no solution based on Great Power consensus could be found, and decided to prepare for a military action. The Swiss Federal Council, in turn, took several measures to face the Prussian threat. General Guillaume-Henri Dufour was called upon to re-organize the armed forces. Dufour was named Commander-in-Chief of the Swiss troops, thus enjoying extended authority. Some 30,000 troops were mobilized and deployed on the Rhine river, to support further mobilization if necessary. Dufour planned to conduct an offensive in the area of Schaffhausen, linked to a strong defense in Basel. This was the last war plan in Swiss history to preemptively engage ground forces in large numbers beyond the national border.

In Prussia, three generals developed operational plans to attack Switzerland: Prince Frederick Charles, General von Reyher, and General von der Groeben. General von der Groeben's operational plan is the most impressive by virtue of the secrecy surrounding it, the use of surprise at the operational level, and the clearly defined objectives. Although it underestimated the role of terrain and the will of Swiss resistance, its implementation would have tested the Swiss defenses severely.

The affair did not end in bloody struggle, but in political compromise. The Swiss government released its prisoners and the King of Prussia renounced his rights on his "beloved principality." The long-term consequences were favorable for the Swiss. Facing a common threat, they regained the unity that had been seriously weakened some ten years earlier during the Sonderbund War (1847). This resurgence of Swiss nationalism and patriotism in turn made a lasting impression on the Great Powers, and certainly contributed to the continued respect that Switzerland's neutrality enjoys to this day.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

In 1856-1857, Switzerland and Prussia were on the edge of an armed conflict over Neuchâtel, a Prussian principality and also a Swiss canton. This ambiguous situation had existed since the Congress of Vienna in 1815 and became critical in 1848. Two political systems opposed each other: Swiss radicalism and Prussian monarchism. In the heart of Europe, Switzerland enjoyed a special status of neutrality. The Great Powers recognized this perpetual neutrality as a stability factor, neutralizing the important Swiss lines of communication, in the best interest of Europe. No major power should take advantage of the key passages. Thus conflict quickly exceeded a regional aspect: the Concert of Europe felt concerned with a possible enlargement of Prussian power. The international implications played a major role in solving the conflict in a peaceful way.

On the national level, this struggle helped the Swiss to re-unify: having to face a common adversary, the aftermath of the recent Sonderbund War<sup>1</sup> vanished. The Swiss unity and willingness to defend its national territory demonstrated to Europe that Switzerland would not give in to foreign pressures.

General Dufour's plans to defend the country outside of its borders are a subject of major interest. Such an offensive posture is virtually unique in

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<sup>1</sup> In 1847 Switzerland was highly divided: politically, the industrialized cantons of the central plain (Plateau) tried to reinforce the power of a central government and to let disappear the differences between the cantons (money, postal services, internal customs, etc.) seeking by this way to develop trade. The small cantons, which were all Catholic, were afraid to lose their liberties and sovereignty. Religious divergences brought the country to war. General Dufour, who was commanding the Federal Army (Protestant cantons) demonstrated, in addition to his military skills, great respect for its adversaries and tried to avoid casualties and damage. The war lasted for 25 days and cost less than 400 casualties for both sides. The new Constitution of 1848 is a direct consequence of the war.

Switzerland's modern history. However, the planning was not the adequate answer to the Prussian intentions.



## II. THE ORIGINS OF THE CONFLICT

The Neuchâtel crisis of 1856-57 arose in part out of the aftermath of the Revolutions of 1848. But it was also the culmination of a much longer rivalry between France, Prussia and Switzerland for influence there.

### A. HISTORY OF NEUCHÂTEL (1707-1848)

In 1707, Marie d'Orléans, Duchess of Nemours, Countess of Neuchâtel, last survivor of the House of Longueville, died without any direct heir. Fifteen different pretenders formulated claims for the possession of Neuchâtel . Two major figures emerged among them: François-Louis de Bourbon, Prince de Conti, supported by Louis XIV, and Frederick I, King of Prussia.<sup>2</sup> Inevitably, the confrontation between these two powerful parties should be considered more on a political than a legal level: the possession of Neuchâtel could facilitate military operations against the Franche Comté, which was conquered by Louis XIV at the expense of the Habsburgs. Frederick I spent more than 600,000 thalers to buy influence in Neuchâtel. The best positioned pretender was the Prince de Carignan Savoie: he renounced his rights and was compensated with thirty-three thousand pounds by the King of Prussia. In the end, the government in Neuchâtel thought that the King of Prussia would be the better choice, being powerful and not too close by. On November 3, 1707, the government<sup>3</sup> decided to select Frederick I as their sovereign.

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<sup>2</sup> For more detailed information about the pretenders and the legal disputes between them, the reader can consult Jacques Petitpierre, *Neuchâtel et la Confédération Suisse devant l'Europe*. Neuchâtel: Éditions H. Messeiller, 1958.

<sup>3</sup> Called "les Trois-Etats."

The Swiss cantons did not react to this decision: they were divided about the question. The Catholic cantons were not interested in the enlargement of the Confederation with further Protestant elements and thus favored the Catholic king of France. The Protestant cantons supported the Protestant King of Prussia and were not especially interested in increasing the number of French-speaking people. About this last statement--the language--all the Swiss cantons agreed, independently of their religion.

Louis XIV reacted: he could not admit that Frederick I, a prince with whom he was at war, was selected, thus winning a tactical advantage. He sent troops to the border but in the end did not use them. He did not want to start a conflict with part of the Swiss and was too preoccupied with other troubles in the Flanders.

Thus Neuchâtel's position in the eighteenth century is somewhat ambiguous: politically belonging to Prussia, geographically located in Switzerland, and more or less openly threatened by France. However, this period can be characterized as peaceful, even if some republican ideas developed, such as a consideration to join the Swiss Confederation; after 1789 the revolution in neighboring France brought a wind of independence.

In 1805, Napoléon planned the war against Austria and Russia. To keep Prussia neutral he proposed to give up Hanover, which was a permanent object of covetousness by the Berlin cabinet. In exchange, the King of Prussia handed over the Principality of Neuchâtel and the dukedom of Clèves to France, and the marquisate of Ansbach to Bavaria.<sup>4</sup> For many people in Neuchâtel, this voluntary alienation marked the end of the treaty of 1707. The King of Prussia had renounced his rights forever.

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<sup>4</sup> Finally proposed at the Treaty of Schoenbrunn, signed on December 15, 1805, following the victory of Austerlitz and the seizure of Vienna; confirmed at the Treaty of Paris, February 15, 1806.

In 1806, Napoléon gave up the Principality of Neuchâtel to Marshal Berthier, as "private property."

On December 23, 1813, Austrian troops began to occupy Neuchâtel, which in their view belonged to an allied prince of Napoléon.

In June 1814, the King of Prussia announced that he was going to take back his rights over Neuchâtel, achieving at the same time a "closer union to Switzerland."<sup>5</sup>

The Congress of Vienna (1815) decided to give natural borders to the Swiss. The Swiss government accepted Neuchâtel as a new canton, at the same time as the cantons of Valais and Geneva. However, the sovereignty of the King of Prussia was maintained as specified in Article 23 of the final act of June 3, 1815: "His Majesty, the King of Prussia ...his heirs and successors, will possess, again as in the past, in total property following territories, ...the Principality of Neuchâtel together with the county of Valangin."

No mention of these rights figured in the treaty between Neuchâtel and the Swiss government. Thus the real problems began – the source of a conflict between Switzerland and Prussia was created.

The people in Neuchâtel were widely divided: the aristocratic families expressed strong feelings for the royalist regime and Prussia, while the liberals became more and more republican and Swiss, and wanted to be totally detached from their bonds with Prussia.

As early as 1820, the government of Neuchâtel was discussing a move to buy back the Prussian rights.<sup>6</sup> Opinions were still divided.

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<sup>5</sup> *Mémoire sur la question de Neuchâtel* 1856, N.p., n.d, pp. 28, 31.

<sup>6</sup> Ch. Godefroid de Tribolet, *Mémoires sur Neuchâtel*, p. 354, cited by Phillipe de Vargas, *L’Affaire de Neuchâtel 1856-1857. Le Négociations diplomatiques*. Lausanne: N.p, 1913.

On September 13, 1831, Lieutenant Bourquin, leading some three hundred fifty armed men, seized the seat of the government, with the goal of ousting the King of Prussia and installing a republican government. However, these radical elements—or "patriots," as they called themselves—failed to organize and thus allowed the government time to claim help from the Swiss Government to maintain order. The Confederation sent emissaries to negotiate with both sides, and troops to separate the adversaries. The previous government took power again. When the federal troops left, after two months of occupation, the government did not consult the people about their future as promised, and persecuted the republicans. New attempts to overthrow the government followed, all unsuccessful. As a consequence, the positions hardened. Persecutions increased, and the government of Neuchâtel manifested a desire to break relations with the Confederation. On August 28, 1833, the authorities refused to send the representatives "of the Principality" to the assembly of the Swiss Confederation. The federal authorities in turn threatened military occupation, and the representatives duly arrived. The tensions continued in 1847, when the "Principality of Neuchâtel" refused to send its contingent under the federal command to fight in the Sonderbund War. Neuchâtel had to pay a fine of 300,000 francs for this decision to flout the rules.

Within the population of Neuchâtel, the different parties increasingly radicalized their positions, until it led to a real revolution. In the name of liberty and equality, the republicans seized the power on March 1, 1848, under the command of Fritz Courvoisier and Ami Girard. Their goals were clearly defined: a) to abolish the old regime; b) to institute the republic; c) to break the personal union with the King of Prussia; d) to attach the canton solely to the



Swiss Confederation.<sup>7</sup> The government was ill-prepared to defend itself and fell without a single shot.

As the Swiss emissaries arrived in Neuchâtel, they found a provisional government already in place. "The Principality called you for help, the Republic welcomes you" was the authorities' greeting.<sup>8</sup> Since the Treaty of 1815 stipulated that the Confederation had to cooperate with the functioning government, the Swiss did not envisage a military intervention as they did in 1831, in order to respect the conventions. Of course, they absolutely favored the new government and its ideas. Von Sydow, Minister of the King of Prussia, vehemently protested. Prussia did not appreciate the attitude of the Swiss government, but it did not have the opportunity to react. As in France, Austria and Italy, troubles broke out in Berlin. By March 18, the revolution threatened the Prussian throne.

The provisory government in Neuchâtel elaborated a new constitution. The first article gave the general trend: "The canton of Neuchâtel is a democratic republic and constitutes one of the states of the Swiss Confederation."<sup>9</sup> On April 30, 1848, the people accepted the new constitution with a vote of 5,813 in favor and 4,395 opposed.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Louis Edouard Roulet, "Aspects neuchâtelais d'une contre-révolution," chapter in *Les Événements de septembre 1856*, Neuchâtel: Imprimerie Centrale S.A., 1956, p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> Edgar Bonjour, *Vorgeschichte des Neuenburger Konflikts, 1848-56*, Berne: Berner Untersuchungen zur Allgemeinen Geschichte, 1932, p. 11.

<sup>9</sup> *Mémoire sur la question de Neuchâtel 1856*, p. 47.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

## B. POLITICAL EVENTS BETWEEN TWO REVOLUTIONS (1848-1856)

The Great Duchy of Baden, located on the borders with France and Switzerland, was highly influenced by revolutionary ideas. The two revolts of April and September 1848 were prepared by revolutionaries from Swiss territory, with the support of some cantons. The government of Baden mastered the situation with its armed forces. It generally condemned the Swiss position. The defeated revolutionaries fled to Switzerland to seek protection, which exacerbated the situation. The revolution started again in 1849, in southern Germany. The King of Prussia reacted by sending two army corps led by his brother, Prince William. His idea consisted of reducing the revolution in blood, which he did, and then of occupying Neuchâtel to solve this nagging problem once and for all. This was a good opportunity for the radicals to unify the country. As they wrote in their press: "The whole people burns to deal with the wild soldiery of the Prussian tyrant."<sup>11</sup>

The tension increased as a Hessian company, with a strength of 170 men, occupied the small enclave of Büsingen.<sup>12</sup> The Federal Council decided on July 24, 1848 to increase the strength of the Gmür division to 8,000 men, and to mobilize two other divisions of the same size. General Dufour was nominated as the commanding general. The first division (Gmür) was engaged on the border between Kreuzlingen and the mouth of the Aare river, the third division (Bontems) in the west up to Basel. The second division (a Bundi) was kept in the rear, as the army reserve. General Dufour thought that the size of the reserve was too small to face a threat which could develop

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<sup>11</sup> Bonjour, *Vorgeschichte des Neuenburger Konflikts, 1848-56*, p. 41.

<sup>12</sup> Büsingen is located north of the Rhine river, as are Schaffhausen and Ramsen.

very quickly; he organized two additional divisions,<sup>13</sup> which should occupy the areas between Lucerne and Zofingen, and between Solothurn and Delémont. "Caution must anticipate events; to avoid being surprised it is always good to think things through in advance."<sup>14</sup> He planned to mobilize formations of the landwehr, if needed. Dufour's plan did not seek a decision on the border, with long lines of defense. Its main idea was to concentrate on the rear, to maximize the natural strength of the terrain. The ratio of reserves versus engaged troops (3:2) is extremely high. The uncertainty of the situation can explain this decision. A screen (the two divisions in front, engaged on the border) allows him to detect the enemy intention and then to concentrate with the main body to seek the decision.

Dufour clearly identified the problem of leadership: "...it would be difficult to find officers to lead all this corps."<sup>15</sup> The political situation evolved positively: without foreign support, the King of Prussia renounced his plan. The Hessian company, surrounded by two battalions, was disowned and had to leave Swiss territory.

Between August 7 and November 22, the Federal Council successively demobilized its troops. General Dufour was pleased to note that the Swiss had reunited to face a common enemy. One battalion from Aargau was stationed together with a company from Unterwalden in Mellingen: they knew each other, because they were directly opposed in Gislikon during the Sonderbund War. They fraternized, as many units did, in several places.

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<sup>13</sup> Not mobilized.

<sup>14</sup> Otto Weiss, *Gestalten und Gewalten der Schweizergeschichte*, vol. 2, Berne: A. Francke AG, 1939, p. 146.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, p. 147.

Dufour invited the artillery officers who led the fire against him at the same battle.<sup>16</sup> Thus, he wrote in his diary that "The result of the campaign was reconciliation, which meant a lot."

The crisis started again in 1849, however, with a new insurrection in Baden and a new engagement of Prussian formations: the problem between Switzerland and Prussia was not resolved.

The Swiss Government decided on June 15, 1849 to mobilize one brigade in Basel, under the command of Colonel Kurz. When the threat did not subside, a second brigade, under the command of Colonel Müller, prepared the defense of the canton of Schaffhausen on July 3. The revolutionaries from Baden were severely defeated by the Prussian army. They sought refuge in Switzerland, which allowed them to cross the border, with 10,000 men and 60 guns. They were disarmed and interned.

The exasperated King of Prussia sought support from the Great Powers. France should allow the use of its territory for Prussian operations against Neuchâtel. One need only recall the close relationship of the "Prince-Président" Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte<sup>17</sup> with Switzerland to understand that this approach had little chance of success. In addition, the Concert of Europe did not favor a war in the middle of Europe, even to crush Swiss radicalism. England was one of the main supporters of the Swiss policy, taking care of the actual balance of power on the continent. Frederick William IV renounced the use of force to re-institute his power in Neuchâtel. His new attempt

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<sup>16</sup> These two events are cited by Edouard Chapuisat in *Le Général Dufour, 1787,-1875*, Lausanne: Payot, 1935, pp. 164-165.

<sup>17</sup> Louis-Napoléon grew up in Arenenberg, on the Swiss side of Lake Constance. As a Swiss citizen, he went to the officer school in Thun, where he was a student of a certain Captain Dufour, the future general. A close friendship developed between the two men, which lasted through the years. Dufour was the confidante and, if requested, always gave advice.



concentrated on the diplomatic level. He considered that the Neuchâtel affair was a question of principle, concerning every sovereign in Europe: "The insignificance of the object should not overshadow the greatness of the principles."<sup>18</sup> Neuchâtel was a republic created by a revolution and it should be of a common interest to re-establish the rule of "divine right." Thus Frederick William IV's emissaries tried to obtain support for a kind of crusade against Swiss radicalism.

Von Sydow proposed that Tsar Nicholas I should organize a conference with the Great Powers. Thus everyone could acknowledge that questions of principle were dominating the debate. Tsar Nicholas was known to be very conservative; yet, he declined, not being interested in defending what he considered private interests.

Austria and France were reluctant to support Prussia's views. In England, Bunsen, the Prussian emissary, was received by Palmerston, the foreign minister. After having guaranteed that the King of Prussia was renouncing a restoration in Neuchâtel for the present, he got a note which recognized the rights of Frederick William to Neuchâtel. However, the British Government "...would be very happy ...to help to find a friendly solution to this conflict."<sup>19</sup>

The King of Prussia pursued his efforts. He thought that he had succeeded as on May 24, 1852, the five Great Powers signed the Protocol of London. His rights to Neuchâtel were clearly recognized. However, he renounced taking any initiative as long as other Great Powers were trying to negotiate. This political result was in fact of little interest for Frederick William: he had tied

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<sup>18</sup> Bonjour, "L'affaire de Neuchâtel sur le plan européen," chapter in *Les Événements de septembre 1856*, p. 128.

<sup>19</sup> Papers preserved at the British Record Office, 1856.

his hands. The Great Powers, especially England and France, always found good reasons not to undertake negotiations, which were always at an "inappropriate time."

For Switzerland, the Protocol of London did not have great importance. However, for the first time, Napoléon recognized Prussia's rights. It was essential to him to reintegrate the conference of the Great Powers since his coup. He knew that the other powers were afraid of a French Republic contesting the conditions made in 1815. Thus, everyone enjoyed seeing the Concert of Europe working again.

In Neuchâtel, the royalist party still thought that Prussia would intervene. It did not register popular support. On March 28, 1852, the royalists got 14 deputies elected, against 74 for the republicans. However, one should be careful with these numbers; many royalists did not accept the republican rules and did not vote.

The royalists had little confidence in the Protocol of London. They organized secret meetings, as the "black cabinet," to prepare the counter-revolution. They tried to find out if the king would directly support them in an armed coup. A clear answer was difficult to obtain. Thus the conspirators thought that the king did not intend to order such a coup, but that, once started, he would tolerate and support it.

Von Sydow reassured the royalists: the Restoration would definitely take place. It was just a question of time. Thus they had to support the existing conditions and trust their sovereign.

Frederick William hardly tried to bring the Great Powers to discuss the question of Neuchâtel again. His last attempt was made in Paris at the beginning of 1856, when the peace ending the war in Crimea was debated. As on former occasions, his request was not taken into consideration.

In August 1856, Colonel Frederick de Pourtalès, one of the moderate royalist leaders in Neuchâtel, went to Berlin to meet with the Prince, Manteuffel, the President of the Council of Ministers, and General Gerlach. In fact, he did not get clear answers from the divided Prussian Government. However, he understood an ambiguous statement that the king had decided to "...do what his honor commands" as an encouragement to the counter-revolution. Pourtalès declared that "He now knows what he has to do,"<sup>20</sup> and went back to Neuchâtel.

Considering the failures of the diplomatic approach, a coup using force was for the royalists the only remaining option. Colonel de Pourtalès and Colonel de Meuron were designated as the military leaders. They now had to prepare their troops to restore the king's authority over his "faithful Principality." George-Frederick Petitpierre, Count of Wesdehlen, was the political leader of the insurrectionist movement.

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<sup>20</sup> Bonjour, *Vorgeschichte des Neuenburger Konflikts, 1848-56*, p. 96.



### III. THE 1856 COUP, THE RESOLUTION OF THE NEUCHÂTEL AFFAIR (1856-1857)

#### A. THE COUP

Colonel de Pourtalès wrote his first order on August 29, 1856. It stipulates:

The movement is to be conducted during the night, between September 2 and 3. It will be simultaneously carried out in Neuchâtel and in the mountains.<sup>21</sup> The royalists of Neuchâtel will get specific orders. By the present order, the royalists of the mountains will have to rise en masse. The royal authority will be simultaneously proclaimed in La Sagne, Le Locle, La Brévine and in the neighboring communities. Meeting points will be designated ad laler. (Signed: The Commander in Chief in the name of the king, in its Principality of Neuchâtel and Valangin. Pourtalès, Colonel.)<sup>22</sup>

Thus during the night between September 2 and 3, 1856, the two actions took place. Colonel Pourtalès, leading some four hundred men, seized the City of Le Locle at 0215. At 0300, Colonel de Meuron attacked the castle in Neuchâtel with about a hundred men, and seized it. They immediately started to reinforce it, in preparation for counterattacks. In the city of Neuchâtel, the royalists arrested some leaders of the republicans, with little success: some were on leave or had managed to escape. On September 3 at 0800, the following declaration was posted in Neuchâtel: "Long live the king! The king's flag flies again over our prince's castle. People of Neuchâtel, thank God! Faithful [people] [come] to me! (Signed: de Meuron)."<sup>23</sup> During

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<sup>21</sup> The part of the Jura belonging to Neuchâtel is called "the mountains" by the inhabitants of the canton. Strong rivalries (economic and political) opposed and still oppose people living in "the mountains" with the one of the coast of the lake.

<sup>22</sup> *Rapport du Conseil d'Etat au Grand-Conseil de la République et canton de Neuchâtel sur l'insurrection royaliste du 3 septembre*. Neuchâtel: Imprimerie de Charles Leidecker et A. Combe., 1856, pp. 6-7.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, p. 10.



the daytime of September 3, the republicans realized what had happened, reorganized and mobilized their forces. Several skirmishes occurred. Major Girard, leading republican troops, hindered the royalists from seizing la Chaux-de-Fouds and ejected them from Le Locle. At 1800, the Vice President of the Confederation, Fornerod, accompanied by Frey-Hérosée, another federal councilor, arrived in Neuchâtel "...to re-establish the constitutional government and to prevent a bloody confrontation between the parties; military strength will be ordered to their disposition."<sup>24</sup>

Under the leadership of Colonel Denzler, the republican troops attacked the castle in the first hours of September 4. After a short fight, the royalist leaders tried to escape and their troops surrendered. The casualties were relatively low: eight dead and 26 wounded. The number of prisoners varies among the sources and the literature. The official report of the government mentions 530 of them (482 coming from the canton of Neuchâtel). One could imagine that some additional prisoners were quickly released.<sup>25</sup> The exact number is not important. The fact that they were captured by the republicans in the name of the legally elected government of Neuchâtel, and not by the federal troops, which would have involved the Swiss Confederation, constitutes a determining factor. It was important that the problem could be solved internally. The argument used in 1848 that the Confederation had to deal with the installed authorities in Neuchâtel was thus maintained. A military intervention against the royalist party could have been interpreted as a "foreign" interference in local affairs. Effectively the four battalions sent by

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<sup>24</sup> Procès-verbal du Conseil Fédéral. Archives fédérales 1856 II 391.

<sup>25</sup> Karl Meyer mentions "667 prisoners. Most of them were liberated after some few days ...," *Der Neuenburger Konflikt 1856/1857 im Spiegel der zeitgenössischen Schweizerischen Presse*, Basel: Basler Beiträge zur Geschichtswissenschaft, 1945.

the Confederation arrived in Neuchâtel at 1800 on the same day, as the Neuchâtel Government was absolutely mastering the situation.

A federal examining magistrate, Duplan-Veillon, started his inquiry and on September 23, the majority of the prisoners were released. Seventy were prosecuted, and among them fourteen, the leaders, were sitting in jail. The general public prosecutor of the Confederation proposed that the accused leaders be charged with high treason and attack against the State's security. The trial was planned to take place in Neuchâtel on January 3, 1857.

Of course, King Frederick William IV reacted: he could not admit that his faithful supporters were jailed and faced a trial. He ordered his ambassador, Von Sydow, to require the Confederation to release the prisoners without any condition and to re-establish his rights. Von Sydow should threaten to use force to impose the king's will. Jacob Stämpfli, President of the Swiss Confederation, rejected the demand: he was ready to negotiate the fate of the royalists, but only after a renunciation of Prussia's claim to the "Principality."

## **B. THE NEUCHÂTEL AFFAIR AS A EUROPEAN PROBLEM**

Frederick William developed intensive political activity in order to get the support of the European powers. The Neuchâtel affair preoccupied the European governments essentially for two reasons: first, this friction occurred just after the Crimean War (1853-1856) and the Great Powers were interested in maintaining the peace that had just been re-established. Second, they were afraid of new revolutions. After having been crushed, the defeated revolutionary movements had regained their strength and were observing the radical Swiss Government challenging a monarchy with greatest interest. President Stämpfli did not play this card: he did not want to internationalize the conflict.

The Swiss authorities thought they could rely on Louis-Napoléon, Emperor of the French people, who had declared: "As long as I will be alive, Switzerland can rely on me; I will always consider the Swiss territory as sacred as the French one."<sup>26</sup> The Emperor certainly did not want to consider having Prussian troops on France's border; however, he was interested in gaining Prussia's support in Italy, where he favored the independence movement against Austria. In addition, he was pleased to play the role of arbiter in European affairs. On October 24, 1856, he wrote a letter to General Dufour proposing to "...set free the prisoners on my formal request."<sup>27</sup> After this gesture of goodwill, he thought that the affair would find a natural solution. On the other hand, Napoléon III was threatening that, if the Federal Council did not accept his proposition, "...he would put no obstacle to the concentration of a Prussian army in the Grand Duchy of Baden."<sup>28</sup> The Federal Council received the letter and decided to take advantage of Dufour's friendship with the Emperor and sent him to Paris. On November 13, Dufour met Napoléon III and discussed the situation for three hours: first, the prisoners had to be released and after that, the emperor would organize a conference and convince the King of Prussia to renounce his rights. Dufour met Lord Cowley, British ambassador, who encouraged the discharge of the prisoners, without giving further promises. Count Walewski, the French

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<sup>26</sup> Bonjour, *Les Événements de septembre 1856*, p. 131.

<sup>27</sup> Guillaume-Henri Dufour, *Campagne du Sonderbund et événements de 1856*, Neuchâtel: Sandoz, 1876, p. 204.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, p. 205.



foreign minister,<sup>29</sup> nevertheless felt there was "...a moral certainty of success in Berlin."<sup>30</sup>

The Federal Council was not convinced by the French arguments. It lacked serious guarantees. Thus, it rejected Napoléon III's proposition. Dufour's diplomatic mission to Paris had failed.

The tension grew very quickly. The Minister President of Prussia, von Manteuffel, directly threatened:

If the diplomatic efforts in Bern do not succeed, the Berlin cabinet intends to move three army corps to the Swiss border and to seize Schaffhausen as a guarantee. The expedition's costs would be charged to Switzerland.<sup>31</sup>

The hard line of the Federal Council did not vary. Thus, on December 13, Prussia broke diplomatic relations with the Confederation, announcing a mobilization of some 150,000 men on January 2, 1857, and that the king would personally lead the troops.

Frederick William intensified the diplomatic discussions with the European powers in order to get support for his military plans. He was surprised by the French reaction allowing the use of force. However, as Napoléon III considered the Swiss mobilization and their strong willingness to fight, he discouraged the King of Prussia from mobilizing (December 23 and 26) before all diplomatic efforts were made. Thus France went back to its prior position.

Russia theoretically supported Prussia: Tsar Alexander II had appreciated Prussia's neutrality during the Crimean War, and thus exerted moderate

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<sup>29</sup> Count Walewski was the natural son of Napoléon I and Marie Walewska.

<sup>30</sup> Dufour, *Campagne du Sonderbund et événements de 1856*, p. 212.

<sup>31</sup> *Die Zeit*, November 16, 1856.

pressure on the Swiss government. At the same time, he recognized the dangerous consequences to which a war in central Europe could lead.

Frederick William was certain that he could rely on Emperor Franz Joseph, who shared his views on Swiss radicalism. Did they not wish some few years earlier to re-establish the old order in Switzerland, taking back Neuchâtel for Prussia, giving Geneva to France and Ticino to Austria? This unrealistic plan was strongly condemned by England at that time.<sup>32</sup> Ticino basically presented a problem for Austria; for some ten years, this canton was the refuge for Italian patriots and revolutionaries. The Swiss asylum exasperated the Austrian authorities, especially, for instance, in February 1853, when a revolution took place in Milan, organized by people protected by the Swiss border. Napoléon defended Swiss neutrality and interests. Without his intervention, a conflict would have arisen between Austria and Switzerland. However, one should not overestimate the threat coming from Ticino. France and Sardinia represented other dangers to Austrian stability on northern Italy. Edwin von Manteuffel presented his king's plan: Austria should support the military operations with armed forces invading a part of Switzerland. In return Prussia would send the same strength to support Austria in northern Italy, when needed. Franz Joseph was realistic enough to consider the peace in this area a vital interest. In addition, he disliked the thought of increasing Prussian influence in Austria, and was highly distrustful of any reconciliation between Prussia and France. Buol, the President of the Cabinet in Vienna, used all means possible to disconnect Paris from Berlin. The passive Austrian official position--to take no special measure--disappointed Frederick William: he felt that the Protocol of

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<sup>32</sup> See Edgar Bonjour, *Preussen und Österreich im Neuenburger Konflikt, 1856/57*, Berne: Zeitschrift für Schweizerische Geschichte, p. 24.

London should be strictly respected, and that diplomatic efforts would be undertaken to invite the Federal Council to release the prisoners. In addition to this peaceful position, Austria directly encouraged the southern states of Germany to deny the right of passage across their territory to Prussian armed forces. Thus, the rivalries between Prussia and Austria weighed against the recovery of Frederick William's "dear Principality of Neuchâtel."

England and Switzerland had good relations. They shared common liberal conceptions. England was preoccupied with maintaining peace on the continent, which would allow a harmonious development of trade. Thus, from the beginning, Palmerston and the British cabinet firmly supported the cause of the Swiss government. When Frederick William wrote to Queen Victoria, he got a flat refusal of any help, even though his rights were recognized. The Protocol of London was mentioned as something to be respected. Furthermore, the Treaty of 1815 did not allow Prussia to intervene: "Prussia was a party to all the arrangements of 1815, by which the neutrality, independence, and inviolability of Switzerland are placed under the guarantee of all the Powers which were parties to the Treaties of the year."<sup>33</sup> The British disliked the fact that Prussia was trying "...to prevent an independent State from bringing to trial persons who have committed acts against a de facto Government, which in every country of the world would be deemed a violation of the social compact."<sup>34</sup> England reinforced its position with stronger notes transmitted just before the Prussian mobilization. However, England would certainly not have gone to war to protect

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<sup>33</sup> Roland Beck, *Roulez tambours*, Berne: Allgemeine Schweizerische Militärzeitschrift, 1982, p. 82.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

Switzerland. Facing the Concert of Europe, Prussia was thus isolated with its war plans.

The attitudes of the German states, lying geographically between the two opponents, were of course important factors with respect to military movements. Bavaria supported Prussia: it was time for Switzerland to learn how order should work in Europe. Baron v.d. Pfordten, Minister President, defended the monarchical principles. It was for him a favorable course of action to exploit the Neuchâtel affair to "...cut off forever the head of the revolutionary hydra in Europe."<sup>35</sup> However, Bavaria was not ready to do more than allow Prussian troops to move through its territory. This authorization was officially given on January 6, 1857, by King Maximilian II.

A military operation against Switzerland would have had important consequences for Baden, a direct neighbor: not only would Prussian armed forces cross its territory, but they would also use it as a base of operations. For this reason, Baden risked Swiss retaliation if it took an active part in the conflict. Von Meysenburg, the Minister President, took some preventative measures to protect Constance and other important locations. He tried to get more information from the Prussian cabinet, without any success. Grand Duke Frederick I favored involving his troops, and hoped to seize Schaffhausen for his own benefit. The government, however, was reluctant to intervene in the conflict for internal political reasons: it feared that democratic movements could take advantage of the situation to start a new revolution. Facing such uncertainties, the duchy opted for a cautious neutrality. The regiment in Constance withdrew on December 23: the signal of non-intervention was given.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid, p. 85.



In Württemberg, King William I gave total support to his "cousin." However, diverging opinions arose. Public opinion and the newspapers considered Switzerland "...peaceful, inoffensive and the best neighbor of Germany."<sup>36</sup> Prussian militarism was highly criticized. A group of liberal representatives wrote a request to refuse passage to Prussian forces. Thus, despite the king's support, Württemberg was opposed to foreign forces moving through its territory. Prussia could have forced them, but resistance could have been expected. Possible guerrilla warfare could have created major difficulties for both kings.

The attitude of the North German states was different: they unanimously condemned Switzerland. However, the general public opinion was that of reservation, as opposed to the noble leaders. The great Duke of Hesse declared:

The day when the Prussian forces would march past would be a true feast for [me]. The army should penetrate into Swiss territory deeply to seize the mountain passes. [I] hope that this opportunity to remove the Swiss right of asylum should not be wasted; the radical actions should no longer be tolerated.<sup>37</sup>

Prussia persuaded the German Federation to blockade Switzerland. Thus the border was closed with Bavaria, but not with Baden or Württemberg, which continued to export grain and horses. Even the embargo on weapons was not respected: the rifle factory in Altendorf (Württemberg) was working day and night to produce weapons for the Confederation. Such a blockade did not make great sense, as Switzerland could continue to trade with other neighbors, especially Austria and Sardinia.

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<sup>36</sup> Bonjour, *Les Événements de septembre 1856*, p. 142.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

The diplomatic network of the Swiss Confederation was relatively thin: ambassadors were to be found in Vienna and Leipzig, but no one was assigned to Berlin. Thus the Swiss interests were not defended at Frederick William's court, at least not officially. Some private initiatives were taken to convince the king to renounce a military operation. Theodore S. Fay, Minister of the United States in Bern, and Heinrich Gelzer-Sarasin, a history professor from Basel, made the trip to Berlin to meet the king. The Federal Council sent emissaries to its neighbors in southern Germany to make clear that they should not collaborate with the Prussian army.

It is difficult to know what the Swiss people thought about a possible war with Prussia. The newspapers described a strong patriotic élan, supporting the firm line of the government; diplomats in Bern mentioned the aggressiveness and willingness to defeat the Prussian army. The Duke of Saxen-Coburg-Gotha wrote that the Prussian policy "generated the warlike spirit of the old Confederation in such a way that the European powers were afraid." Henri-Frédéric Amiel composed a special song for the troops engaged on the Rhine river, with telling words: "In our cantons, every child is born a soldier," "Switzerland always saw heroes, never slaves...." More significant are the facts that there were no difficulties in mobilizing the troops; the canton Vaud offered twenty-five battalions instead of the nine requested. Volunteers came from all over the country. Student societies, like Zofingen in Geneva, formed a corps.<sup>38</sup>

Some opposition to the government's inflexibility appeared in the National Council. Representatives thought that concessions should be made and suggested establishing new contacts with Napoléon. General Dufour was

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<sup>38</sup> Chapuisat, *Le Général Dufour, 1787-1875*, p. 192.

not able to leave for Paris; he was leading the Swiss army. Thus the Federal Council designated Dr. Kern to go to Paris where he met Barman, the Swiss Ambassador to France. Napoléon III could persuade Frederick William to postpone the mobilization from January 2 to January 15. The French Emperor showed personal letters from the King of Prussia, which suggested that he would renounce his rights if the prisoners were released and given amnesty. In fact, the French position did not vary, compared with the propositions Dufour brought back to Bern some weeks earlier. The Federal Assembly voted and accepted the solution of offering amnesty to the prisoners and to banish them until the King of Prussia definitively gave up his rights to Neuchâtel. During the night of January 17, the prisoners were brought to the border in Les Verrières. They engaged themselves not to come back to Switzerland before the end of the negotiations and left to Pontarlier. The decision to release the prisoners raised criticism. Some people argued that the government exchanged real traitors, who were not even judged, against a vague promise concerning rights which did not exist. For the first time during this period of tensions, a division occurred among the different parts of the country. The French-speaking part, regardless of the political parties, did not understand "the cowardly giving up." The newspapers severely criticized the decision of the Federal Assembly and presented the war as the solution to the problem. "We are all ready and we are strong enough to measure ourselves [with Prussia]."<sup>39</sup> "Diplomacy should settle the matter; if it cannot, let the powder spark."<sup>40</sup> There was mention of treason by "our Germans."

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<sup>39</sup> "Revue de Genève, January 9, 1857," cited by Karl Meyer, in *Der Neuenburger Konflikt 1856/1857*, p. 265.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

In fact, it would have been very delicate to bring the "revolutionaries" before a court, as those of 1848 were never prosecuted and the prisoners' release meant an attempt to avoid armed conflict.

To the Prussian public, the decision of the Swiss Government was considered a victory. The king was thought to be able to exert some pressure during the negotiations.

### C. THE END OF THE CRISIS

A direct agreement between Switzerland and Prussia was impossible. England, however, convinced France to organize a peace conference in Paris attended by both belligerents, as well as by Austria and Russia. The negotiations were difficult: the radicalism of the Swiss was rejected by all the Powers, except Britain. Nevertheless, the British representative Cowley took an increasing role and convinced the other powers to support Switzerland.

Frederick William presented the following claims:

1. The title "Prince of Neuchâtel and Valangin" should be maintained forever by the King of Prussia.
2. The costs for the Swiss mobilization should not be charged to the royalists in Neuchâtel .
3. The amnesty for the former prisoners should be extensively assured.
4. The King of Prussia should get a compensation of two million.
5. The properties of the Church and of the State should be separated in the canton of Neuchâtel .
6. The religious charitable organizations should be assured.
7. The Constitution of Neuchâtel should be re-voted only by people born as citizens of Neuchâtel.



After four sessions, the Federal Council gave directives to Dr. Kern to defend the following positions:

1. Switzerland could not forbid the existence of the title; however, no claim should be made by the king based upon this title.
2. Agreed.
3. Agreed.
4. Refused: protest against any compensation.
5. Refused: no interference in cantonal decisions.
6. Agreed: however, without any intervention by a foreign state.
7. Refused: it was not possible to admit a violation of the Federal Constitution.

Prussia protested but finally agreed. During the eighth session, on May 26, all the parties signed a treaty containing eight articles.<sup>41</sup>

Art. 1. "His Majesty the King of Prussia agrees to renounce his rights forever... on the Principality of Neuchâtel."

Art. 2. "The State of Neuchâtel ... will belong to the Swiss Confederation..."

Art. 3. "The Swiss Confederation takes all the costs resulting from the events of September 1856 to its charge. The canton of Neuchâtel will not be charged, proportionally, more than another canton..."

Art. 4. "The costs charged to Neuchâtel will be equally shared by all the inhabitants..."

Art. 5. "A full and entire amnesty will be guaranteed for all offenses..."

Art. 6. "The properties of the Church, unified to the State in 1848,

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<sup>41</sup> Jacques Petitpierre, *Neuchâtel et la Confédération Suisse devant l'Europe*, Neuchâtel: H. Messeiller, 1958, pp. 360-361.

will not be diverted from their prior destination."

Art. 7. "The capital and income of religious institutions, of private institutions ... will be respected ... "

Art. 8. "The present treaty will be ratified ... "

The treaty was signed by Walewski (France), Hübner (Austria), Cowley (England), Hatzfeldt (Prussia), Kisseleff (Russia), and Kern (Switzerland) and ratified on June 16, 1857. The conflict was over with two major positive factors for Switzerland. First, the internal divisions resulting from the Sonderbund War were erased. Second, the determination to defend the country at any cost left a good impression on the Great Powers. Switzerland's willingness to protect its neutrality and to defend its interests were thereafter taken into account by the rest of Europe. This attitude may have helped to preserve Swiss neutrality and peace in the future. For the Concert of Europe, finally the treaty of Paris marked a success: the "status quo" was maintained, war was avoided in the heart of Europe, and the monarchies remained in power.

## IV. THE MILITARY SITUATION IN SWITZERLAND AND THE MILITARY MEASURES TAKEN

### A. SITUATION OF THE SWISS ARMED FORCES

The most recent military reorganization prior to the struggle with Prussia took place in Switzerland in 1850, as one of the consequences of the Sonderbund War. Thereafter, the Confederation started to play a more important role in the military organization and education, although still limited in comparison with the great reforms that took place in the 1870s. Centralization was progressing but incomplete; the cantons were still responsible for the education of the infantry formations, while the Confederation trained the specialists (engineers' corps, artillery, cavalry, guides for exploration purposes, logistics formations, snipers).

Every Swiss male had to serve in the armed forces. Those who were not able to carry out military duty were required to pay a special tax. This system is still in effect today.

The duration of basic training school was 42 days for specialized troops in federal camps, 28 days for the infantry. Refresher courses of one week were organized every year for the main body. Engineers' corps and artillery constituted an exception, serving (for two weeks) every two years.

These periods of military education were short compared to the professional armies of the time. In cases of crisis, the mobilization was supposed to be ordered early enough to allow further improvement of military skills.<sup>42</sup> In addition to the weakness of short training periods, smaller units were not accustomed to collaborate with each other: the notion

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<sup>42</sup> It is interesting to consider that this same way of thinking exists today in the Swiss Army, as in other armies, even in professional ones. (See the importance of training for the U.S. troops before Operation Desert Shield and Operation Desert Storm).

of "combined arms" did not exist. The troops of the so-called "elite"<sup>43</sup> used to train at least on the half-battalion level for three days every year, or for six days every two years. The reserve trained the same way, but for reduced periods (two to four days), while the "landwehr" trained only for one day.

Even if the Prussian troops were not organized by von Roon, they would probably have had an advantage in pure military education about the Swiss formations. However, one should take other factors into consideration in comparing the two parties. These aspects will be treated later in the present paper.

The strength of the "elite" formations was as high as 70,000 men (serving from the age of 20 until 34), and the federal reserve had 35,000 men (serving from age 35 to 40). The rest of the male population was incorporated into the "landwehr." The following units constituted the "elite" and the federal reserve:<sup>44</sup>

|                                      |   |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| – infantry:                          | 105 battalions                          |
|                                      | 20 half battalions                      |
|                                      | 22 independent companies                |
| – engineers' corps:                  | 12 sapper companies                     |
|                                      | 6 pontonier companies                   |
| – artillery                          | 63 companies (with a total of 600 guns) |
| – logistics formations <sup>45</sup> | 12 companies                            |

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<sup>43</sup> "Auszug" in German, "élite" in French.

<sup>44</sup> From the "March 4, 1853 Order for the Reorganization of the Units," edicted by the Federal Council.

<sup>45</sup> "Park" in German.

- cavalry 35 companies
- guides 7 and 9 half-companies
- snipers 71 companies

Brigades and divisions were to be organized for specific missions. Thus, every division could be different in size and composition. During peacetime, the division commanders were not designated, and no planning staff existed at this level. It appears to be a weakness, not having had commanders preparing engagements, influencing the education and creating an "esprit de corps" for their divisions. This kind of flexibility cannot compensate for the resulting lack of readiness.

## B. SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF SWISS STRATEGIC THINKING

General Dufour exerted a great influence on the ideas of the Swiss military intelligentsia. His military background<sup>46</sup> determined his strategic reflections. His model was definitely Napoleonic. It is interesting to note his disinterest for Jomini's work: he never pardoned the "treason committed against the emperor." In Dufour's bookcases, no major book written in German could be found. Thus, several analysts argue that Dufour even ignored the theories developed by Carl von Clausewitz.

On the political level, the government adopted a strict neutrality. The question of looking for allies to support military actions was not taken into

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<sup>46</sup> Dufour left Geneva in 1807 at the age of twenty. He was admitted as a student at the famous "Ecole Polytechnique" in Paris, and graduated fifth in his class. He chose to be an engineering officer and went to the "Ecole d'application du génie" in Metz. His first military assignment was on the island of Corfu, in the Ionian Sea, with the mission to reinforce it. Corfu was the last place to surrender at the beginning of May 1814. As Napoléon came back from Elba Island, Dufour was assigned to reinforce the line between the Rhône and the Saône, at the haughtiness of Lyons. With the defeat of Napoléon, Dufour decided to return to Geneva, one of the new cantons of Switzerland. He was no longer interested in serving France, where the values he had defended were condemned. In March 1817, Dufour was incorporated as a captain in the Federal Engineering Staff.



consideration. This was true in part because Switzerland was a special case in the heart of Europe, an isolated democracy in the middle of countries ruled by monarchic systems. This perception of strict independence was shared by the military leaders, as Dufour said in front of the officers in Geneva:<sup>47</sup> "In every case, one should just rely on himself to repel an invasion."

The defense was considered to be the most successful way to deal with an adversary, by taking advantage of the strength of the terrain, which was increased by the extensive use of fortifications. However, an offensive component was also necessary to reach the decision, to destroy the enemy. Thus, the leading idea was to conduct a defense with offensive elements. The desire to take advantage of internal lines made mobility essential. Basically, the front elements were to separate and to canalize the opposite forces. Then the maneuver elements were to attack isolated columns and destroy them before enemy reserves were able to intervene. Concentration of forces and local superiority were paramount. Thereafter, another isolated formation could be attacked in succession. However, experience demonstrates that to plan such successive attacks is not realistic: losses, time to reorganize, and time to move tend to make several successive attacks by reserves or mobile forces uncertain and risky.

It is interesting to note that no concrete plans were available on the eve of the 1856 events. The officers of the federal general staff were busy with the tremendous task of accumulating the data to produce the new Swiss maps, called the Dufour-map, which still constitutes the foundation of the federal topography.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Dufour was the founder of the "Officers' Society of Geneva."

<sup>48</sup> In 1833 Dufour started to elaborate a modern map of Switzerland, "a living picture of the homeland." This map was not only designed as a military instrument, but as a tool for



Nevertheless, Dufour carried out some strategic analysis during the period between the Sonderbund War and the crisis with Prussia. In particular, he defined the area where the decision had to be made:

The great lozenge formed by the water course of the Aare, the Limmar and the line following the foot of the Alps from Weesen to Thun, passing by Schwyz and Stans, is of great military value. All the interior defense has to concentrate in this lozenge. It is like a vast entrenched camp for the federal army. It is possible to dispute ground outside of the perimeter; however, it is inside of it that the main battle, which will determine our fate, should happen.<sup>49/50</sup>

Dufour determined forward bastions where "...divisions in charge of their defense will dispute them relentlessly."<sup>51</sup> One should not imagine that each striped area (see note 50) would be simultaneously defended by a division: the strength of the Swiss armed forces would not have been sufficient to implement such a plan, while conducting a main effort in the central zone. The occupation of these sectors would have been ordered in response to possible threats. Estimating the political situation in Europe in the 19th century, a simultaneous threat coming from each direction was unlikely.

Considering Dufour's strategic ideas, some points should be emphasized. First, offensive actions were planned across the border: initiative was intended to bring success. These offensive actions would take place in the proximity of Schaffhausen (on the Aach and Wutach rivers, as later elaborated for the 1856-57 campaign), in the Rhine Plain (to block the main access coming from Austria), and on the Arlbergpass. As Dufour wrote, the

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civilization of the country. Its accuracy is very high: the biggest error on the line joining up with Italy does not exceed 65 centimeters. The completion of the map cost more than one million francs to the Confederation and took more than twenty years.

<sup>49</sup> Weiss, *Gestalten und Gewalten der Schweizergeschichte*, p. 182.

<sup>50</sup> See Appendix A: map of the central area and of the forward bastions.

<sup>51</sup> Weiss, *Gestalten und Gewalten der Schweizergeschichte*, p. 182.

possession of this pass "...would be of the highest importance, if we have to act offensively in this direction."<sup>52</sup> This offensive posture is especially interesting in relation to neutrality. After this period, no offensive action was planned across the border, without having an enemy on Swiss territory. The adversary would have to cross the border first.

At Dufour's time, the approach of an army would have been considered provocative enough to justify an attack across the border. Second, the three main entrances or passages through the Swiss Alps--St. Maurice, St. Gotthard, and Sargans--are all inside one of the "forward bastions." Dufour, as an engineer and a strategist, considered building roads in the alpine area, to allow the movement of troops in a tactical area, with the possibility of using by-roads. Many of the roads and passes allowing movement from one North-South transverse to another were built according to Dufour's plan. Third, surprisingly, Dufour did not contemplate a linear occupation along the borders with large reserves to intervene in areas not included in the bastions, such as the cities of Basel or Geneva. Later, in 1864, he published a study about the defense of the western part of Switzerland,<sup>53</sup> in which he treated this specific problem. It was important to

...resist everywhere in case of a border violation. This is necessary to assert our neutrality, and to reassure the population, who might otherwise think they were being abandoned.<sup>54</sup>

A last characteristic of nineteenth century Swiss strategic thinking is the key role of fortifications and reinforcement of the terrain. The three key

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 183.

<sup>53</sup> Guillaume-Henri Dufour, *Défense de la Suisse romande*, N.p., n.d.

<sup>54</sup> Weiss, *Gestalten und Gewalten der Schweizergeschichte*, p. 186.

points in the Alps (St. Maurice, St. Gotthard and Sargans) have always been fortified. Dufour developed and extended them, a process of continuous permanent modernization, this is still under way. Beside these sites, the tendency to reinforce almost every strong part of the Swiss territory made itself felt. Dufour even reinforced a few cities on the northern edge of the "great lozenge," including Aarau, Olten, and Brugg. The idea of fighting inside these cities may appear quite modern. Yet, no consideration of civilian casualties can be found. Should the population be evacuated in order to escape the artillery fire from both sides? The question remained open.

### **C. FIRST MILITARY MEASURES TAKEN IN 1856: THE REORGANIZATION OF THE ARMED FORCES**

On October 16, 1856, General Dufour and Colonel Fischer, Artillery Inspector, were commanded to go to Berne. Their mission was to plan the detailed organization of the divisions, and to propose officers of the federal general staff to command them. They even had to prepare staffs for non-existent levels of command. Thus, two well-identified weaknesses were going to find a solution. On November 5, the President of the Department of Defense, Frey-Hérosée, convened a commission to define the army's organization. It was determined that the strength of the armed forces should be 104,500 men, without the landwehr. Each division should be established on the same model, with the following structure:

- 1 staff;
- 3 infantry brigades, composed of four battalions and two sniper companies;
- 2 and a half cavalry companies;
- 3 batteries of field artillery;
- 1 logistics company;

- 1 sapper company.

A total of nine divisions was planned, without any corps structure. On one hand, it would allow the commander-in-chief to have direct influence on the division level in a more efficient manner, creating a wide unity of command and increasing mobility. On the other, it made the number of direct subordinates relatively high, especially if one considers the importance of formations designated as the Army Reserve. The Army Reserve was made up of the following formations:

- 1 infantry brigade, composed of four battalions and three sniper companies;
- 4 and a half independent infantry battalions and 21 independent infantry companies;
- 17 sniper companies
- 3 cavalry brigades, composed of three squadrons;
- 5 artillery brigades, composed of three batteries;
- 12 fixed artillery batteries
- 3 sapper companies;
- 6 bridging companies.

With such a powerful reserve, it was possible to imagine several uses:

1. to constitute a mobile element to lead attacks on the flank or on the rear of the enemy;
2. to reinforce engaged divisions in wide or strategically important areas;
3. to support a main effort or to achieve surprise.

On November 17, the designated commanders were confidentially informed about their future assignment, in order to take preliminary measures and prepare themselves for their new task. Their final



nominations had to take place only a few days before the mobilization; however, in order to avoid transgressing on the authority of the federal assembly. The designation of the commander-in-chief remained within its competence, and it would have been unwise to force its decision.

By the same token, the general headquarters were designated for each division: Bienne, Moutier, Liestal, Aarau, Frauenfeld, Sankt-Gallen, Chur, Zürich, and Berne. "A territorial district was assigned to each division and each commander had the liberty to move its brigades on its own."<sup>55</sup> On December 30, the federal assembly nominated General Dufour as the commander-in-chief with 130 votes out of a total of 140, and Frey-Hérosée as the chief of staff with 118 votes.<sup>56</sup>

#### D. OTHER MILITARY MEASURES

On December 19, the Federal Council decided to call together the War Council. President of this Council was Frey-Hérosée, members were General Dufour and other high-ranking officers, including Colonels Fischer (Commander of the Artillery), Egloff (Commander of the Sixth Division), Kurz (Commander of the Fourth Division), Veillon,<sup>57</sup> von Salis (Commander of the Seventh Division), Stehlin,<sup>58</sup> Delarageaz (Engineer), and von Linden (Commander of the Cavalry Reserve). As they were preparing measures, the Federal Council had already taken the decision to mobilize and

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<sup>55</sup> Dufour, *Campagne du Sonderbund et événements de 1856*, p. 220.

<sup>56</sup> "Sitzung der schweizerischen Bundesversammlung," in *Denkschrift über die Neuenburger-Frage*, N.p, n.d., p. 45.

<sup>57</sup> Two colonels named Veillon commanded the first and second divisions. Dufour did not specify if Charles or Frédéric was the member of the War Council.

<sup>58</sup> Function unknown.



deploy two divisions along the Rhine. The third division, commanded by Colonel Bourgeois, was deployed between Basel and the confluence of the Aare river; the fifth division, commanded by Colonel Ziegler, had a sector between the confluence of the Aare to Lake Constance.<sup>59</sup>

The War Council decided to reinforce Basel and Schaffhausen, in order to protect these two vulnerable cities, and to hinder the enemy from penetrating Swiss territory. Dufour wrote very accurate instructions to the engineer officers: time was short, thus the fortifications had to be built in a simple way, to quickly give sufficient protection to the soldiers, with the possibility of developing and extending them later.

Dufour used the plan elaborated by the French engineers in 1798 to reinforce Basel.<sup>60</sup> The fortifications extended from the confluence of the Birs river to the French border on the height of Klyberk. The entrenchments were planned about 120 meters apart along an arc some three and a half kilometers long. This way the strong points were able to support each other. A second line of entrenchments was planned some 800 meters behind, based on natural obstacles in order to protect the troops against artillery fire. A flood was a part of the plan: by blocking the Wiesen river, the ground would have been soaked to the point that the Prussian artillery and cavalry would have had great difficulties maneuvering. However, the weather conditions would have played a major role: ice could have compromised this idea. Additional bridges would have to be constructed on the Rhine river in order to allow major reinforcements to arrive or retreat into the built up area. Reserves would have been located in the vicinity of the railroad station. For the

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<sup>59</sup> Bodensee.

<sup>60</sup> See Appendix B: map of the plan for the reinforcement of Basel.

defense of Basel, the deployment of 78 fixed artillery guns was planned to support the infantry. Some 30,000 soldiers were supposed to be engaged in the Basel area. With the protection of the fortifications, it would have meant that the Prussian forces would have to concentrate the majority of its strength to have a chance of defeating this defense. One should note that no cavalry element was expected to be engaged in this area: this lack of offensive action meant that Dufour did not intend to seek the decision there. However, to engage almost one third of one's strength in a static defense without real maneuver possibilities could be considered a weakness.

The reinforcement in Schaffhausen had another purpose: the intention was to cover a possible withdrawal of troops engaged across the national borders.<sup>61</sup> Just one bridge crossed the Rhine in Schaffhausen at that time. To allow possible movements, especially for light artillery, Dufour ordered the construction of two more bridges. "No fortification should be built without a secure way to take the gun out."<sup>62</sup>

Dufour did not intend to concentrate forces along the bank of Lake Constance. To dominate the lake and to oppose its crossing by Prussian forces, he ordered the six main Swiss steamers to be equipped with four naval guns and one battery of artillery rockets apiece. The Swiss steamers were more modern than those of the three German states across the lake. They were able to move at greater speed. In addition, "The harbors of Romanshorn and Rorschach were protected with high caliber artillery..."<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> See the detailed plan in Chapter 6.

<sup>62</sup> Weiss, *Gestalten und Gewalten der Schweizergeschichte*, pp. 156-157.

<sup>63</sup> Dufour, *Campagne du Sonderbund et événements de 1856*, p. 218.

Other small towns were reinforced, such as Eglisau and Rheinfelden: their bridges were highly important. Surprisingly, some other crossing sites were not protected, like Waldshut, considered by Colonel Bourgeois "...the most favorable place to cross."<sup>64</sup> The bridges, which were not planned to be used for military purposes, were prepared for destruction: the wooden bridges were ready to be burned, the others demolished with explosives. The bridges needed to maneuver had to be destroyed only after the engaged formations had returned to the southern bank of the Rhine.

To realize all the fortification works, the existing engineers' formations had to be reinforced by civilian professionals: more than 2,000 foreigners, who were previously engaged in railway construction, were "mobilized" and paid on a daily rate base. The chief of the engineers branch understood that the quality of reinforcements made by infantry or by artillery troops did not reach the expected level of quality.

For the first time in Swiss history the telegraph was used to relay the different division headquarters and a new line was built along the Rhine. The general staff prepared to move troops partially by railroads, after their mobilization, exploiting the new possibilities created by this new technology. However, these possibilities proved to be relatively limited: in the area of possible engagement there was just one railroad line leading from Basel over Zürich to Lake Constance. Moreover, it was interrupted between Olten and Baden. Considering the location of the divisions, this line could have played a role in moving reserve elements, reinforcements, and other logistics goods. But the results achieved were relatively poor: the transport of two battalions in one day failed.

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<sup>64</sup> Beck, *Roulez tambours*, p. 68.

The supply of the armed forces constituted a delicate problem: the Swiss government decided to increase the autonomy in buying "2,000 barrels of flour and 2,500 quintals of rye in America, 5,000 quintals of oats in Southern Germany."<sup>65</sup> This last deal demonstrates the ineffectiveness of the Prussian measures to isolate Switzerland economically. Furthermore, bankers in Stuttgart lent twelve million francs to the Federal Council to support the cost of the preparation for war. With incomes of 20-21 million francs a year, it was practically impossible to support the war effort without borrowing money.<sup>66</sup> Part of the money was designed to buy rifles and ammunition. In the middle of December 1856, the Confederation possessed some fifteen million cartridges for the infantry and the cavalry.

The President of the Confederation, Stämpfli, organized the first intelligence service. The center was located in Basel and directed by the head of the police, Bischoff. People traveling to Germany reported on preparations there. At the end of 1856, Swiss officers led reconnaissance missions along the Rhine and across the border. As in the other armies of the time, however, intelligence and communications were among the weakest points.

The Federal Council gave Dufour wide authority. He was able to use

...all war material and ammunition of all cantons, to requisition everything he thought reasonable, to put up fortifications and, if an enemy started to move toward the border, to take the offensive without regard to the frontier of the country. It is apparent that these instructions gave real dictatorial powers to the general for the duration of the campaign.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Roland Beck, "L'affaire de Neuchâtel et le Général Dufour," chapter in Roger Durand, ed., *Guillaume Henri-Dufour dans son Temps: 1787-1875*, Genève, Société d'histoire et d'archéologie, 1991, p. 351.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid. Roland Beck mentions the borrowing of 24-30 million francs in foreign countries. Dufour probably mentions the first one, in the amount of twelve million.

<sup>67</sup> Dufour, *Campagne du Sonderbund et événements de 1856*, pp. 223-224.



## E. THE OPERATIONS AT THE ARMY LEVEL

At the time General Dufour was designated commander-in-chief, the two divisions along the Rhine river had the mission of controlling the border, in a linear disposition. In addition, the Federal Council had taken measures to secure command and control: on December 27, the general staff and the staffs of the first, second, fourth, sixth, and eighth divisions were mobilized. A same measure was taken for the brigade staffs of these concerned divisions. The main body of the "elite" formations and the army reserve were on alert, ready to be mobilized.

Considering that the Federal Council placed great weight on preventing an attack from South Germany, Dufour estimated that these two divisions, with a total strength of some 14,500 men, were too weak to fulfill this task. The sectors to be covered were too wide. He decided to deploy five divisions on the front.<sup>68</sup> The sixth division, commanded by Colonel Egloff, occupied the right wing between Rohrschach and Diessenhofen. He had to organize the landwehr from St.-Gallen in such a way that the formations would be able to protect the harbors of Arbon and Rohrschach, and to watch the shore of the lake. Thus, Colonel Egloff would be in a position to concentrate by Constance and Stein. The already mobilized fifth division was newly deployed between Diessenhofen and the mouth of the Töss river, and had to be ready "...for a possible defense of the canton of Schaffhausen."<sup>69</sup> The first division, commanded by Colonel Charles Veillon, took its position between the mouths of the Töss and Aare rivers.

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<sup>68</sup> See Appendix C.

<sup>69</sup> Weiss, *Gestalten und Gewalten der Schweizergeschichte*, p. 152.



The fourth division, headed by Colonel Kurz, took over a part of the former sector of the third division, between the mouth of the Aare river and Rheinfelden. In this way, the third division could concentrate on the defense of Basel.

The three new mobilized divisions were not complete: the infantry brigades had just half of the usual strength.

It may be surprising that Dufour did not plan to mobilize the cavalry reserve, which would have given mobility. The cavalry would have allowed him to react to an unexpected action, to quickly reinforce a threatened area, or to bring offensive actions against the enemy camp. Even to watch over the border, one can assume that fewer fixed posts with decentralized mobile reserves might have constituted a worthwhile alternative.

The Federal Council accepted the proposed disposition on January 2, 1857. Thus, General Dufour disposed of a force of some 30,000 men.<sup>70</sup>

On this way, without spending too much money, I had a force of some 30,000 men, able to cover the border of the Rhine river, between Basel and Constance. In very few days, we could have had more than 100,000 men, if the enemy would have moved forward.<sup>71</sup>

Dufour decided to move the different headquarters closer to the possible sites of action:

- first division: from Bienne to Regensberg,
- second division: from Moutier to Laufen,
- third division: from Liestal to Basel,
- fourth division: from Aarau to Frick,
- fifth division: from Frauenfeld to Schaffhausen,

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<sup>70</sup> See Appendix D for the detailed numbers.

<sup>71</sup> Dufour, *Campagne du Sonderbund et événements de 1856*, p. 226.

- sixth division: from St. Gallen to Frauenfeld,
- ninth division: from Berne to Winterthur.

The headquarters of the seventh and eighth divisions remained in Chur, respectively Zürich.

Analyzing the sites of the second and ninth division headquarters, it appears that the former was planned to reinforce the area of Basel and that the latter would have been engaged to support the fifth division in Schaffhausen. Considering the terrain, the army reserve should have been placed in the vicinity of Zürich, as General Dufour wanted "...to vigorously defend Basel and to attack near Schaffhausen."<sup>72</sup> A concrete plan for the use of the reserve was not elaborated at that time, which is somewhat surprising. Of course, on the one hand, only the first elements were actually deployed; on the other, the staffs should have planned how to use those elements, from which they expected to achieve the decision.

General Dufour moved his own headquarters from Berne to Zürich on January 14, "...to be closer to the center of the large movements I had planned."<sup>73</sup> On January 16, a telegraphic message informed the General that the Federal Council had decided to release the prisoners: the possibility of a conflict was over.

General Dufour was satisfied that "...the Swiss people had proved to the world, that, in case of an external threat, the passions stop and men of all political persuasions were able to hold out their hands and to gather under the federal banner to defend, at the price of their blood and of the most noble

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., pp. 245-246.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 246.

sacrifices, the honor and the independence of their homeland."<sup>74</sup> However, he felt somewhat frustrated that the political decision taken by the federal authorities was not really different from the proposition he made earlier based on his discussions with Napoléon. He ordered the reinforcements of the terrain to cease. On January 21, the non-mobilized formations stopped to be on alert readiness. Between January 26 and February 2, the mobilized divisions stood down. On February 2-3, General Dufour went back to Berne with his headquarters, and eight days later he left to go back to Geneva.

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid, pp. 247-248.



## V. MILITARY MEASURES TAKEN BY PRUSSIA

### A. GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

The military establishment in Prussia was highly divided about the Neuchâtel affair. They understood that Frederick William IV considered this conflict a question of honor and principle. However, the risks and costs of such an undertaking had to be carefully evaluated. Apart from the king, the Prussian way of thinking was realistic: the first manifestations of "Realpolitik" occurred during this period (Otto von Bismarck was among those involved in the political decision). For these realistic people, a military operation should bring some clear benefit. A mere adventure should not interest a great power.

General von der Groeben was concerned with this analysis of costs and risks.<sup>75</sup> How much strength would be necessary to bring a victory against the Swiss? The Swiss strength was estimated at some 100,000 soldiers, which could be increased to 180,000, according to Minister President von Manteuffel. The terrain favored the defenders, who had the reputation of possessing great skill in rifle shooting. The unity of all the Swiss population was taken into consideration: it is always difficult to conduct an offensive action in a country where the spirit of resistance is high. Furthermore, two different systems of values were facing. Considering that attacking forces should have at least a superiority of 3:1, a strength of some 300,000 should have been considered. General von der Groeben tried to figure out what should be the size of the attacking forces: "With 50-60,000 the attack would just be an attempt; with 100,000 a success would be possible."<sup>76</sup> He certainly thought that the effect of

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<sup>75</sup> See Roland Beck, *Roulez tambours*, p. 75 and following for more detailed information.

<sup>76</sup> Beck, *Roulez tambours*, p. 75.



surprise could play a major role, and that a political solution could be found after the first battle, or even before, once a concrete threat had been made on the Swiss border. The possibility of seizing a part of the Swiss territory to negotiate an exchange was considered. Seizing Basel with its 30,000 defenders, would have required the use of 100,000 men. However, no one can show that the Swiss plan in Basel was known by the Prussian leadership. Von der Groeben thought that the conflict could escalate into a major struggle involving other European Great Powers. This opinion was shared by Bunsen, the former Prussian diplomat in Bern:

An attack against Switzerland [means] a war against England and France, and a war without allies is not possible. ...An occupation of Switzerland, even of a single city, is a European question; the sovereignty of the Swiss territory is a fundamental pillar of the European system.<sup>77</sup>

To face such a threat, 100,000 men should be added to the previous forces.

Thus, General von der Groeben asked fundamental questions:

How much will the engagement of 200,000 men cost? Will 60 million be enough money? And for what purpose? Is our duty concerning Neuchâtel not exceeded by other duties?<sup>78</sup>

The possibility of internal troubles or of an unfriendly attitude of the South-German states was not considered.

Von Manteuffel planned to invade the Swiss territories north of the Rhine, and to press the attack only if the Swiss did not react, thus accepting the king's legitimate requests.

On December 13, 1856 the Minister President suggested that the mobilization should be ordered on January 1. 60 days were necessary to initiate the attack. When Frederick William heard of the French decision not

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 76.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

to intervene if Prussia seized a part of Switzerland, he decided to follow von Manteuffel's advice. On December 26, however, the king accepted Napoléon's request to delay the mobilization until January 15, in order to allow a diplomatic solution. He wanted to demonstrate his "extreme moderation," even if he got angry with the military measures taken by Switzerland: the news that 20,000 men were deployed on the Swiss border had reached Berlin four days earlier.

## B. PREPARATIONS FOR THE MOBILIZATION

The first reflections of the Prussian military leadership were similar to the one of their Swiss counterpart: they were concerned about the organization of the armed forces engaged in the operation. The chief of the general staff, von Reyher, thought that a force of 120,000 men should be adequate to face the estimated 106,000 Swiss soldiers of the "elite" and the army reserve. He justified this reduced force by noting that the Swiss lacked training for larger operations and had little discipline. The war minister agreed that eight divisions should make the attack, but with an additional reserve. On December 10, 1856, the final "Ordre de Bataille" was ready: four army corps, each composed of two divisions, would compose the main body with a strength of 116,000 men. Each corps would be supported by eleven artillery batteries of eight guns each. This gave a total of 352 guns for the artillery, against 600 for the Swiss. Von der Groeben estimated that the Swiss artillery counted 200 guns,<sup>79</sup> which demonstrates a failure of intelligence. That could certainly have had consequences. It makes a great difference if one attacks with a ratio of 7:12 in guns, instead of 7:4. However, the attacking force has

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<sup>79</sup> Edgar Bonjour, *Der Neuenburger Konflikt 1856/57*, Basel: von Helbing and Lichtenhahn, p. 173.

greater flexibility in concentrating its guns, considering the limited mobility of artillery batteries. A cavalry brigade should also be attributed to each corps. Thus, instead of 10,300 horse, which would have constituted the normal strength, the cavalry would get only 6,800 horses<sup>80</sup> of the 32,000 that were planned. The general staff estimated that further cavalry forces were unsuitable in a mountainous country like Switzerland. There are reasons to reject such an argument: the Prussians might have taken advantage of the cavalry's flexibility against less mobile forces. To seek surprise with attacks in depth might also have exerted an influence on the Swiss Government's willingness to fight the war.

The reserves were designated on two levels: two regiments and one battalion at the division level, and one division of some 30,000 men at the army level, as the Minister of War, von Waldersee had required.

Comparing the numbers, it is amazing to consider the modest forces Prussia was going to deploy without regard for the usual requirements necessary to force a decision against a prepared defense. However, bare numbers do not mean everything, as will be discussed later.

These nine divisions should have come from all the different provinces, in order to demonstrate that every part of Prussia was concerned with the war, even the Polish minority. At the same time, it would allow the government to leave half of the total strength of the eight army corps in the country to maintain order, in case of a revolution.

On October 8, 1856, Frederick William IV formally and definitively designated General von der Groeben as the Commander-in-Chief of the Expeditionary Force. He first refused this responsibility.<sup>81</sup> This attitude

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., pp. 178-179.

demonstrated in some way his reluctance to lead such an operation and the frictions among the Prussian leadership. He finally accepted, under the pressure of the king, supported by the Minister President and the Minister of War. The king's brother, Prince William, was disappointed, at not being given this honor. Von der Groeben selected his chief of staff, General von Reyher, and the deputy chief of staff, von Moltke.

Major General von Waldersee made the first estimates for the cost of the war: six million thalers would be necessary to finance the mobilization, and three million each month of engagement should be added to the regular budget.<sup>82</sup>

In fact, no decision to provide additional financial support was taken by the Prussian government. The Finance Minister, like other influential politicians, reflected public opinion in Berlin, that this affair was not really all that serious. Yet, money constitutes the nerve of war: this lack of financial support for the operation proves that King Frederick William was relatively isolated in his military vision. Of course, one should consider that he would have had the power to impose his views, if the political situation would have evolved in another way. He could have fired the reluctant Minister and replaced him with a successor more prepared to do as he was told.

### C. PREPARATIONS FOR THE OPERATION

The Prussian leadership took not only contacts on the diplomatic level: Lieutenant Colonel von Fransecky was sent to the Grand Duchy of Baden to arrange a deployment that would exclude possible Swiss disruption of the

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p. 188.



Prussian approach. General von der Groeben thought that Baden should mobilize 10,000 men, in order to: 1) secure the railroad line between Freiburg in Breisgau and Basel; 2) cover the access to the Black Forest; 3) defend Constance until the arrival of Prussian troops; 4) secure the line of the Rhine river on its right bank, and protect the crossing points once the Prussian troops had crossed.<sup>83</sup>

This approach did not get an enthusiastic welcome from the authorities of Baden. They were extremely cautious: the fear of a French intervention, or of a Swiss intrusion and reprisal, was real. As the decision of the Federal Council to release the prisoners arrived in Frankfurt, a feeling of relief arose. The rupture with Prussia had been very close.

The Prussian General Staff sent several officers to Switzerland to collect intelligence and to conduct reconnaissance. They also concentrated intelligence activities in Baden. Some of these officers were identified. On the Hauenstein Pass, a man was drawing plans. One officer was arrested in Aarau, with special maps. They especially studied the possibilities for crossing the Rhine river. These activities were not new: they already started in 1849, which demonstrates the king's longstanding desire to reassert his power on Neuchâtel and to fight Swiss radicalism.

The Prussian General Staff planned to move the divisions by railroad, combined with marches. On January 5, 1857, von Waldersee sent a letter to von Manteuffel describing the use of railroads:<sup>84</sup>

The main lines to be used were the following:

1. From Berlin and from Breslau over Dresden to Leipzig, then over Hof, Augsburg, and Ulm to Biberach.

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<sup>83</sup> Beck, *Roulez tambours*, p. 88.

<sup>84</sup> Presented by Edgar Bonjour in *Der Neuenburger Konflikt 1856-57*, p. 191.



2. From Berlin over Dessau, Halle, Guntershausen, Frankfurt am Main, to Freiburg im Breisgau.

In addition, some other lines should be used as secondary ways:

a. From Magdeburg over Braunschweig, Lehrte, Hildesheim, and Cassel to Guntershausen;

b. From Soest over Cassel to Guntershausen;

c. From Bruchsal over Stuttgart to Ulm;

d. From Mainz to Mannheim;

e. From Bamberg over Aschaffenburg to Frankfurt a.M.<sup>85</sup>

The General Staff calculated that the railroad system would have allowed the movement of troops over distances between 60 and 220 km per day. With an average speed of 35 km/hr, this meant that the troops had to spend between two and seven hours on the train. The movement of some regiments would have taken several days. To move all the planned operation forces would have taken 35 days,<sup>86</sup> including the technical railroad requirements.

This plan, in theoretical terms, is highly interesting; it constitutes a kind of precursor to the one against Austria, which brought the Prussian troops into the battle of Königgrätz in 1866. By this occasion, the Prussian general staff proved its ability to move even a greater amount of troops in a scientific way, with mathematical calculations. Logistics was not forgotten by the Prussian General Staff: several warehouses for requisitions were planned; transportation for foodstuffs and ammunition would be used to bring the wounded back to several improvised hospitals.

The military measures taken by Prussia seem to be adequate, even if the ratio of forces did not conform to conventional standards. Internal tensions and, above all, lack of international support brought Prussia to renounce the

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<sup>85</sup> See map by Appendix E.

<sup>86</sup> Beck, *Roulez tambours*, p. 98.

use of force. Thus, all the organizational measures could not be practically tested.

## VI. DUFOUR'S OPERATIONAL PLANS

### A. THE OFFENSIVE BY SCHAFFHAUSEN

The Swiss political authorities and the army command shared the opinion that Prussia was going to seize Schaffhausen, and then negotiate an exchange for Neuchâtel. Declarations by high-level Prussian personalities confirmed their estimate of the threat. As later would be revealed, this deception worked superbly: the Prussian planners actually worked on other possibilities.

The Federal Council confirmed that the integrity of the Swiss territory should be protected in its totality. Dufour, like other prominent officers, thought that an effective defense of Schaffhausen was impossible. From a military perspective, there were two alternatives: to concentrate the defense on the southern bank of the Rhine river, or to cross the border in order to seek more suitable positions in Baden.

One can argue that a defense of Schaffhausen should have been studied more closely: several plans to defend this isolated canton had been made in modern times, without encroaching upon German territory.

Dufour thought that he did not have to care about other states of the German Confederation: if they were prepared to tolerate the use of their territories for Prussian movements and preparations, they could be considered potential enemies. Dufour was confident of his plans for the energetic defense in Basel, and believed that if the Prussian army "...were to cross the Rhine, they would be playing our game, because we would fight from our positions."<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Dufour, *Campagne du Sonderbund et événements de 1856*, p. 231.

Thus, Dufour planned to conduct "...an offensive in the area of Schaffhausen, and a strong defense in Basel."<sup>88</sup> He would engage the main body, a strength of 50,000 men, in the Schaffhausen area, with 30,000 men to defend Basel, and one division to occupy Chur and the Luziensteig, in order to prevent possible Austrian action. The reserve of some 12-14,000 men was to be concentrated in the vicinity of Zürich, and kept ready to intervene to reinforce the most threatened body.<sup>89</sup>

Believing that an offensive to the Black Forest was too risky, Dufour decided to occupy positions in the hills controlling the Aach and the Wutach rivers. The five divisions engaged in this operation would pursue the following course of action:<sup>90</sup>

On the first day:

1. The first division would cross the Rhine in Eglisau and Kaiserstuhl.
2. The sixth division, coming from Stein, would seize the Schiernerberg and Gailingen. In front of the Diessenhofen Bridge, the engineer's corps would build a bridgehead.
3. The fifth division, which already was in Schaffhausen, would send one brigade on the road of Donaueschingen, another in the direction of Engen, the third one remaining in Schaffhausen.<sup>91</sup>
4. The ninth division would move forward over Andelfingen, in the direction of Schaffhausen.

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> See Appendix F.

<sup>90</sup> Dufour, *Campagne du Sonderbund et événements de 1856*, pp. 233-235.

<sup>91</sup> See map by Appendix G.

On the second day:

1. The first division would continue its movement to occupy the position on the Wutach river.
2. The sixth division would take up a position on the eastern part of the Aach river, between Singen and its mouth into the lake.
3. The fifth division would engage two brigades close to Engen and the third one would occupy Blumenfeld.
4. The ninth division would cross the Rhine river and occupy the position on the Aach river, between the sixth and fifth divisions.
5. The eighth division, coming from Zürich, would arrive in Schaffhausen.<sup>92</sup>

On the third day:

1. The eighth division would continue to the vicinity of Thaingen, in the rear of the first line.

Dufour, conscious that the soldiers were going to encounter difficulties bivouacking in the snow, "...nevertheless felt sure that the patriotism of our soldiers will make them patiently endure this hard trial."<sup>93</sup> From the beginning, he planned to leave the heavy luggage on the left side of the Rhine. This meant that General Dufour did not have the intention to press further than the Aach-Wutach line and that he did not plan to fight the "decisive" battle in Schaffhausen, as will be discussed later.

In fact, Dufour's offensive plan is a defense on foreign territory using favorable terrain features. Dufour possessed a certain freedom of maneuver

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<sup>92</sup> See map by Appendix H.

<sup>93</sup> Dufour, *Campagne du Sonderbund et événements de 1856*, p. 235.



with the eighth division, which could be considered a reserve of first echelon, to buy time to allow the Army Reserve to arrive from Zürich.

One might be surprised that Dufour presented his intention in terms of positioning troops, instead of describing the military actions he wanted his divisions to do. Directly describing how he wanted to engage the brigades, he did not leave much initiative to the division commanders. However, his plan respected some essential principles in the conduct of war: concentration, liberty of maneuver, initiative and simplicity were the main characteristics.

In his book *Campagne du Sonderbund et événements de 1856*, General Dufour explained that he was going to "hold firmly and give up terrain only a foot at a time." He did not plan further offensive actions, but a withdrawal in the case of a "superior adversary." He imagines this action as following:

1. The eighth division should occupy the heights surrounding Schaffhausen; if the reserve would have arrived, this would be its mission. In such a case, the eighth division would defend south of the Rhine river.
2. The sixth division would cross the river by Stein, Diessenhofen and Büsingen. The three bridges would then be destroyed.
3. The ninth division would follow the eighth and cross the Rhine on pontoon bridges, which would then be removed.
4. The fifth division would cross the river by Schaffhausen and Rheinau.
5. The reserve, or the eighth division, would fight as long as possible, then take the artillery from the fortifications in order to bring it to the southern bank, or, if necessary, to throw it into the river. Then this rear guard would march its way back over Schaffhausen, under fire protection of the elements already

occupying defensive positions on the opposite side.<sup>94</sup>

In a next step, landwehr formations and volunteers would be in charge of the defense of the Rhine, allowing the main body to be engaged in another deployment. One could imagine that the main body could occupy what Dufour called the "great lozenge."<sup>95</sup>

Dufour clearly recognized that "...many events could have brought trouble in such a withdrawal."<sup>96</sup> Dufour's withdrawal plan was intended to cost heavy losses to the Prussian troops: he planned to counterattack as soon as an enemy weakness would have appeared.

Dufour did not give orders to prepare the execution of this plan. The only practical measures he took consisted of reconnaissance along the Aach and Wutach rivers, by the commanders of the first, fifth and sixth divisions. He also wrote regulations about the behavior to adopt with the inhabitants of occupied areas. Thus, this plan has to be considered as the result of preliminary thinking about a possible course of action.

This plan is of great historical interest to the Swiss armed forces. It constitutes the last plan to preemptively engage ground forces in such large numbers beyond the Swiss border. In modern times, much smaller actions have been planned, seldom with a strength exceeding a reinforced tank brigade, and always in a reactive way. The enemy had to cross the borders first, clearly demonstrating that he did not respect Switzerland's neutrality. After 1857, to move or concentrate troops on the Swiss border has ceased to be a sufficient reason to justify a preventive attack.

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<sup>94</sup> See map by Appendix I.

<sup>95</sup> See map by Appendix A.

<sup>96</sup> Dufour, *Campagne du Sonderbund et événements de 1856*, p. 237.

## B. DUFOUR'S OPERATIONAL PLAN IN THE EVENT OF A PRUSSIAN ATTACK OVER SÄCKINGEN TOWARD BERNE

Some years after the events of 1856-57, Dufour wrote in his memoirs that he would not have crossed the Rhine river when facing 140,000 men. No one can make such a judgment about unrealized intentions. One supposes that Dufour made this statement after having heard from a high-ranking Prussian officer that they had planned to cross the Rhine by Säckingen and were going to lead the main attack in the direction of Berne. Dufour elaborated a plan to face this threat. As the plan was made some years after the event, however, few historians have been interested in it,<sup>97</sup> or have noticed its existence. Reflecting Dufour's military thinking, this plan can be considered another possible course of action, and as such is of some interest.

Dufour estimated that the Prussian troops would have needed much more than two days to reach the heart of his defense. All the bridges between Basel and Waldshut would have been destroyed. One division was already engaged in front of the enemy in Säckingen. In addition to these elements, the crossing of the Aare river, which constitutes a real obstacle, would have taken further considerable time. Within these two days, Dufour would have had the time to move three divisions from the eastern part of Switzerland to the threatened area. Of course, after two days, even an improvised defense would have improved the defensive position by reinforcing the terrain.

Comparing the first plan of action after the mobilization<sup>98</sup> with the new plan,<sup>99</sup> it appears that two divisions, the third and the fourth, were already

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<sup>97</sup> Roland Beck revealed this plan for the first time in his publication *Roulez tambours*.

<sup>98</sup> See map by Appendix C.

<sup>99</sup> See map by Appendix J.

occupying favorable positions and did not need to undertake significant moves. The second division, previously intended to support the division defending Basel, would have gotten practically the same area, but with another front. As this division was not mobilized, there were no practical consequences. The second division in Laufen should support not only the fourth, in Fricktal, but also the first, on the heights of the Bözberg, a key terrain feature in this area. This division would have prevented the enemy from seizing Brugg and its important bridges on the Aare river. Further, Dufour planned to engage three divisions (eighth, ninth, and sixth) on the Aare river. They had to defend it in such a way that no enemy force would have been able to cross. At the same time, they were supposed to be ready to reinforce or to support the divisions engaged at the front. The Army Reserve would then have reinforced the division, which would have given them forces.

Dufour imagined two means of attacking the enemy in the flank and cutting his lines of communication:

1. If the seventh division was not threatened, it would have had to join the fifth in Schaffhausen, then follow the left bank of the Rhine to Waldshut, and from there push forward on both banks to Basel, cleaning up the enemy.
2. If this action could not take place, the fifth division in Basel would have had to destroy its heavy guns, burn the bridges and attack on Badenese territory in the direction of Schaffhausen.

A combination of these two variants was not planned, which seems to be reasonable. A convergent attack coming from two opposite sides is a difficult maneuver: coordination of fire brings such great problems that losses from friendly fire are almost unavoidable.



Dufour's plan presents interesting characteristics. The concentration of divisions and optimal use of the terrain are positive points. The idea of directing offensive actions along the Rhine river demonstrates Dufour's willingness to fight aggressively. A good defense always has to be combined with attacks, in order to exploit the adversary's weaknesses and to seek the decision. The terrain on both sides of the Rhine, however, is not especially easy: narrow places alternate with wider ones. A real deployment can be achieved for no more than one to three kilometers at a time. Then a constriction obligates the attacking formation to concentrate practically on a single road. The narrow passages are not simultaneously found on both sides, but the river cannot be crossed, physically separating the two forces as they progress: the only support they are able to provide to each other is fire in a limited way, because of the relatively dense vegetation. The hills dominating both sides offer good opportunities to direct attacks against the flank. One may imagine that, after a first contact, the Prussian reserve would hold back on the northern bank to counter-attack in the flank of the progressing Swiss forces. Dufour himself recognized that such a plan would not have been easy to realize.

The engagement of the reserve can be considered as a weakness. It is difficult to understand why forces coming from the three divisions deployed on the Aare river to provide reinforcement to the front formations, should themselves be reinforced by elements of the Army Reserve. One could logically consider directly engaging this reserve to support the front divisions, avoiding additional new subordinations and simplifying the movements. An adequate solution to engage the reserve would have consisted of preparing it north of the Aare to attack the flank of the enemy once it became involved in combat with a front division. Thus, the initiative could have



been taken on two different levels: first, on the strategic level along the Rhine river, second, on the tactical one, directly supporting an engaged division.

It is interesting to notice that Dufour was applying Jomini's principles: "...one of the greatest talents of a general consists of knowing when to use in turn the two systems [defensive and offensive], and especially to know when to seize the initiative, even in the middle of a defensive fight."<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Antoine-Henri Jomini, *Précis de l'art de la guerre I*. Paris: Anselin, 1838, p. 168.



## VII. PRUSSIA'S OPERATIONAL PLANS

Three different personalities developed operational plans to attack Switzerland. Prince Frederick Charles, at this time a twenty-eight year old Lieutenant General, presented a study that one could consider a step in the progress of his education as a general staff officer.<sup>101</sup> In contrast, cavalry General Charles Frederick William von Reyher, chief of the great general staff, presented a genuinely feasible course of action, as did cavalry General Charles von der Groeben, commander of the guard corps. No one can tell which plan would have been selected. However, one point is certain: the king himself would have made the decision.

### A. PRINCE FREDERICK CHARLES' OPERATIONAL PLAN

Prince Frederick Charles' study is characterized by the dominance of politics over rigid military principles. He wanted to maximize flexibility in order to offer a political solution to the Swiss. Thus, he imagined a gradually increasing attack with breaks between the different phases to allow possible negotiations. For him, the key point remained the imposition of the king's decision to restore his rights over the Principality of Neuchâtel. The gradually seized parts of Switzerland would play the role of a money exchange. He first planned to invade Swiss territory north of the Rhine. If the Federal Council did not react positively, Prince Frederick Charles envisaged pursuing the offensive to seize the eastern part of Switzerland (northeast of the line formed by the Limmat river and the lakes of Zürich and Walenstadt), eventually the Jura Mountains area, including the Principality

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<sup>101</sup> Mentioned by Otto Weiss in *Gestalten und Gewalten der Schweizergeschichte*, p. 170.

of Neuchâtel. If the Swiss would not negotiate within 24 hours, he would continue the attack in the direction of Geneva, Berne, and Lucerne, which meant in practice the occupation of the most important part of the country--the cities.

The idea of seizing the eastern part of Switzerland is noteworthy: the right flank can be easily defended based on strong natural obstacles, while Zürich constitutes a valuable political objective, located close to the border, without any major obstacle once the Rhine is crossed at Eglisau. In addition to these elements, the expeditionary force would have allied states in its back, with good lines of communication. The only weakness lies in the crossing sites of the Rhine river, which would cost significant forces to secure. In contrast, an action through the Jura Mountains presents incredible difficulties, and would offer to the Swiss favorable possibilities of defense with relatively few forces. In the Jura area, which is a poor part of the country with few inhabitants, the only interesting objective to be found is the city of Basel, the richest locality of Switzerland at the time. One might well be surprised that the prince did not limit his goal to Basel, the key objective of this area. Perhaps the psychological impact of seizing the "beloved Principality" played a major role in his thinking. As previously mentioned, the seizure of Basel would not have been an easy task. Prince Frederick Charles completely underestimated the strength of Swiss forces engaged in the defense of Basel.<sup>102</sup> However, disliking the fact that the right flank of the attacking forces would have to follow the French border, and realizing the low feasibility of this operation through the Jura Mountains, he renounced this option. He concentrated his study on the attack in the eastern part of Switzerland, developing two

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<sup>102</sup> Roland Beck, in *Roulez tambours*, p. 108, mentions that the Prince estimated that 8,000 men would be engaged in Basel, instead of the 30,000 planned by General Dufour.

variants.<sup>103</sup> The first option (A) would have led the main body to attack between the mouth of the Aare river and the Rafzerfeld. He planned to cross the Rhine with pontoon bridges, allowing 30,000 men to be on Swiss territory within nine to twelve hours. The second option (B) intended the main body to attack by Constance. He quickly renounced this second variant, which was much too dangerous: the terrain did not allow a real deployment. The only role assigned to Constance would have been to fix the Swiss formations in this area, which in fact does not lead to any decision. Thus, Prince Frederick Charles' definitive operational plan foresaw, as the second step, an attack over the Rhine.<sup>104</sup> Facing the first Swiss division, the crossing operation would have been risky and the casualties probably high. In addition, the Federal Reserve, located near Zürich, could have been engaged in a very short time. The main problem General Dufour would have had to face would have been to reconstitute a new reserve and to re-concentrate forces, which seemed to have been a realistic possibility. No one could predict the result of the struggle, if this variant would have been applied. It is interesting to note that Prince Frederick Charles' plan did not please the Generals von der Groeben and von Reyher. They did not criticize the risks taken by the crossing operation. They did not appreciate the different breaks in the action. For them, political considerations should not reduce the liberty of maneuver of the commanding general, who should be free to exploit eventual enemy weaknesses. Once an attack was underway, the momentum should not be interrupted. Von Reyher mentioned<sup>105</sup> that Napoléon I did not use political

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<sup>103</sup> See map by Appendix K.

<sup>104</sup> See map by Appendix L.

<sup>105</sup> Beck, *Roulez tambours*, p. 110.



objectives. The enemy armed forces had to be defeated, pursued, and destroyed. Then the negotiations could take place. It is effectively strange for a military leader not to concentrate on the defeat of the opposed armed forces. However, one should note that Prince Frederick Charles prepared his study in the first half of December 1856. At that time, the Swiss authorities had not ordered a mobilization and the population had not demonstrated its "warlike spirit." Thus, Prince Frederick Charles overestimated the pressure that the mere presence of the Prussian army could have exerted on the Swiss authorities.

## **B. GENERAL VON REYHER'S OPERATIONAL PLAN**

In fact, General von Reyher's ideas might be more accurately described as a scheme of maneuver, rather than an operational plan: no detailed study has been found. In the specialized literature, this plan is always evoked in relatively vague terms. The general intention of General von Reyher consisted of crossing the Rhine river between Basel and Säckingen, to eventually seize Basel or just bypass it, and to lead the main attack to Berne, the strategic objective.<sup>106</sup>

The idea of defining a clear strategic goal is interesting: with the seizure of the enemy's capital and possibly the country's government, the possibilities of Swiss resistance would have been greatly reduced. General von Reyher seems to seek a political center of gravity, in the Clausewitzian sense.

General von der Groeben accepted Berne as a final objective. However, he criticized the fact that two major obstacles, the Rhine and the Aare rivers, had to be crossed.<sup>107</sup> Prussian engineers confirmed that the crossing of the Aare

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<sup>106</sup> See map by Appendix M.

<sup>107</sup> From von der Groeben's memoirs cited by Edgar Bonjour in *Der Neuenberger Konflikt 1856/57*, p. 176.

river at Olten was a very delicate technical task. In addition, if the engineers' corps had to build bridges under Swiss fire, it could have definitively compromised the success of such an operation. The fact that the main body of the attacking forces, coming from Stockach, had to move through the Black Forest, brought another risk.<sup>108</sup> The Prussians believed that the Swiss were able to employ snipers in the Black Forest area, and to lead ambushes in a kind of guerrilla warfare. No trace of this original idea is to be found in the Swiss documents and literature of the time.<sup>109</sup>

Frederick William IV accepted the plan, however, with fundamental modifications: "...simultaneously with this main operation [against Berne], to move with detached corps against Neuchâtel and Lucerne on the other hand."<sup>110</sup> This splitting of forces is not very convincing, considering the military principle of concentration, and probably would not have brought more benefit than the seizure of Berne.

According to General von der Groeben, von Reyher accepted the argument about the difficulty of crossing the Aare, and gave up the further elaboration of his plan.

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<sup>108</sup> Possible Swiss reaction to von Reyher's plan is described in chapter 6.

<sup>109</sup> One should note that the idea of conducting guerrilla warfare beyond the border was taken into consideration in the twentieth century by different Swiss military leaders.

<sup>110</sup> Weiss, *Gestalten und Gewalten der Schweizergeschichte*, p. 170.

### C. GENERAL VON DER GROEBEN'S OPERATIONAL PLAN

General von der Groeben began planning an operation against Switzerland as early as November 18, 1856, after having received a preliminary intention from the king of Prussia: "To seize Basel and Schaffhausen with the speed of a storm." And if the prisoners were not liberated and Neuchâtel not placed under protection of the Great Powers within twenty-four hours, "...to march with 50,000 men against Berne and with 10,000 against Neuchâtel."<sup>111</sup> This unconventional formulation, specifying the precise strengths to be deployed, but without any supporting analysis, sounds strange. However, it was sufficient to initiate serious reflections. General von der Groeben put a lot of value on secrecy:

I did not trust anybody [to let him know] my real intention. Even not Reyher. Once revealed, no secret can be maintained until the action's execution. And an unexpected military plan means half of the victory.<sup>112</sup>

He even remained on a very general plane when three of the commanding generals, von Werder, von Wussow and von Bonin asked him about his projects on January 3, 1857. He kept the same line even with Minister President von Manteuffel. Effectively, no one was informed: surprise, whatever its effect, would have been preserved.

On January 11, 1857, after having gotten the results of an engineer reconnaissance on the possibilities of crossing the Rhine at Kadelburg, he prepared an Army order, which did not differ from the previous plan. For him, it was important to seize sensitive strategic objectives, but also to defeat

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<sup>111</sup> Beck, *Roulez tambours*, p. 112.

<sup>112</sup> From von der Groeben's memoirs, cited by Edgar Bonjour in *Der Neuenberger Konflikt 1856/57*, p. 181.

the Swiss armed forces: this latter point makes the great difference with Prince Frederick Charles' operational plan.

General von der Groeben planned to use

...both railroad lines, over Leipzig and Augsburg to Stockach and over Erfurt, Frankfurt am Main, to Freiburg. On each, two corps should move and the operation should start on the communication line Freiburg-Stockach.<sup>113</sup>

The key idea was to attack first on both flanks, in order to divert Swiss forces on these actions, and then to lead the main attack between these two areas.<sup>114</sup> Thus, the fourth corps should attack Schaffhausen from the rear, in combination with an operation against Constance, with the support of the "reduced Constance fleet." The difficulties of crossing the Rhine river by Kaisersaugst or Rheinfelden, and by Stein am Rhein for the other wing are not specifically mentioned in von der Groeben's memoirs. However, it did not represent an easy task. He was aware that Constance was evacuated by the Badenese troops, and that the Swiss could have preventively occupied this city. However, this action served no other purpose than creating a diversion.

With the main body, the first and second corps, he planned to cross the Rhine at Kadelburg, a favorable site to anchor the bridges, but with few possibilities for deployment and poor means of communication. Once the Rhine river was crossed, he would pursue the attack simultaneously with three corps<sup>115</sup> along both banks of the Aare river to Berne. He was ready to

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid., p. 180.

<sup>114</sup> See map by Appendix N.

<sup>115</sup> He probably considered engaging parts of the third and fourth corps in this attack, which could represent the strength of a corps. It would make little sense to leave Basel, Schaffhausen and Zürich without any occupation force.



push "...to the lake of Geneva, if Neuchâtel was not seized by the attack."<sup>116</sup>

He also planned to keep

...strong reserves by the Rhine river, in order to encounter enemy actions against his flanks or rear. Strong bridgeheads on the Rhine river.<sup>117</sup>

In addition to the secrecy that surrounded it, this plan presents several positive aspects, especially in comparison with the one of Prince William Charles and General von Reyher. First, the attack would have been initiated on a wide front of some eighty kilometers. The crossing of a river such as the Rhine, especially in March, constitutes a tough task and one should consider it a mistake to concentrate on one or few crossing sites. The concentration had to occur later, to face the main body of the enemy's forces. This wide deployment required more crossing material and engineers formations than the other solutions would have. Would the Prussian troops have had enough material to pursue the operation, especially on the south bank of the Aare? This important question remains open. Another positive point of this plan is the deliberate attack along both banks of the Aare, which would have allowed a surprise attack against the enemy flank, at least for the first engaged divisions. The concentration of troops was effective, even allowing for a "strong reserve" and "strong bridgeheads," the division of occupation forces in the main cities, and the inevitable casualties. The strategic goals were clearly defined. Undeniably, this plan was superior to the other two alternatives. However, in addition to the unavoidable Rhine river crossing operation, it possessed a major weakness, having to do with the action along

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<sup>116</sup> From von der Groeben's memoirs, cited by Edgar Bonjour in *Der Neuenberger Konflikt 1856/57*, p. 181.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.



the Aare. The right wing, on the northern bank of the river, would have had severe difficulties deploying. In fact, the two corps, or more realistically, the reinforced corps, could just have progressed in columns with an exposed right flank and fragile lines of communication: the Jura Mountains which border the river present favorable possibilities for leading ambushes and other guerrilla-like actions. In addition, several localities present obstacles between the mountains and the river: a defense with relatively few forces could have been very effective. The left wing would have faced similar problems, in fact minor ones, in comparison with the consecutive river crossing operations to mount. The main characteristics of the terrain between Zürich and Berne is that all the rivers coming from the Alps flow into the Aare river. Eleven such rivers are running perpendicularly to the Aare and constitute, for the main part of them, serious obstacles, especially during the spring season. To achieve such a push on the southern bank with destroyed bridges would have cost incredible time, material, and strength. Under fighting conditions, this approach appears to be at least risky, and ultimately not feasible. General von der Groeben hardly criticized the two alternate plans. He might well have been more critical of his own: success was far from guaranteed. Even with good maps, he did not completely take the strength of the terrain into account, which could have been a decisive trump in the Swiss hands.

Dufour's decision to mobilize and deploy five divisions along the Rhine seems to suggest the outcome of at least the first phase of the battle. What could have happened later is pure speculation: among the available literature, no mention is made that General Dufour ever knew anything about von der Groeben's plan. Thus, no later reconsiderations are available, as they are in the case of the action over Säckingen.



## VIII. CONCLUSION

The struggle between Switzerland and Prussia ended without direct military confrontation. Thus, it is impossible to predict what the outcome would have been, given the different alternative plans: one is simply able to compare them to emphasize strong points and weaknesses. These plans are in fact general ideas of maneuver, with such wide possibilities for outcome and so many imponderables, that even a comparison must be treated with caution.

One specific point should be considered: the question of the ratios. Numbers of soldiers and guns can be compared. It is surprising how modest were the forces Prussia planned to engage: at that time, an attacking force was supposed to possess a superiority of three to one. This was not the case, or only locally, if the forces were concentrated on a narrow front. Only General von der Groeben's plan offered the space for reasonable deployments, but at the cost of insufficient concentration.

Numbers, of course, are not everything. According to Paul Kennedy, "In any case, numbers are not as important as morale and training, sophistication of equipment and capacity to project force to distant theaters."<sup>118</sup> Alvin and Heidi Toffler emphasize: "...seizing the initiative, better intelligence and communication, and better trained soldiers, more strongly motivated, all count for more than sheer numbers..."<sup>119</sup> In addition, one should consider the ability of the leaders, and the role of the geographic conditions, such as the terrain and the population.

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<sup>118</sup> Paul Kennedy, *Preparing for the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Vintage Books, 1993, p. 291.

<sup>119</sup> Alvin and Heidi Toffler, *War and Anti-War*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1993, p. 82.

The morale of the Swiss Army would presumably have been better than that of the Prussians: the Swiss soldiers were defending their country, homes and families against an invader. This factor of motivation should have been determining, more than the fact that they were defending democratic values and principles. With respect to training, one must differentiate among the various levels: on a fundamental level, both armies were well trained; on a more detailed level, the Prussian Army certainly had an advantage--corps and division staffs were trained and were used to engaging large forces, which was not the case for the Swiss. The Prussian Army had another small advantage in the area of equipment: all of its soldiers were armed with modern rifles, while the Swiss were partially equipped with older weapons. However, they were known and respected as fearsome gunmen, even by the Prussian generals.<sup>120</sup> With the exception of this question of rifles for parts of the Swiss Army, the equipment can be considered as equivalent in quality.

The attacking force, in this case the Prussians, possesses the initiative, by definition. However, General Dufour's doctrine was not built on pure defense: he always planned aggressive actions in order to force the decision, a "combined defense," conceptually similar to Jomini's ideas. General Dufour's military education clearly determined his taste for the offense: he knew perfectly the Napoleonic principle that "...it is already a big mistake to allow the others to attack you."<sup>121</sup>

In the domain of intelligence and communication, the advantage can be given to Switzerland: it is always easier to collect information in one's own country, while a supporting population and the telegraph lines favored the

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<sup>120</sup> Shooting is still considered a national sport in Switzerland.

<sup>121</sup> Weiss, *Gestalten und Gewalten der Schweizergeschichte*, p. 202.

defenders. However, as mentioned earlier, intelligence and communication of the time were relatively poor, so that all the European countries tended toward the same weakness.

At the highest level of comparison, the leaders of both sides were outstanding personalities, with extensive military knowledge and clear ideas. However, General Dufour was a European authority in the matter of tactics, engineering and topography. His detailed knowledge of the terrain would probably have been a great advantage. He also possessed extended authority--a real "dictatorship"--and the Federal Council would not have interfered in the conduct of operations. General von der Groeben would possibly not have been in such a favorable position, with King Frederick William IV watching over his shoulder: interference on the part of the king would have been likely, considering the king's personality and somewhat chaotic approach.

The geographic conditions present clear advantage for Switzerland: the Prussians would have had to face simultaneously difficult terrain features and a hostile population, in addition to possible negative reactions of other Great Powers and "revolutionary" movements.

Even in comparing these different elements, it remains impossible to establish any prognosis about the military outcome. The only certainty is that a military confrontation would have cost many casualties, suffering and money for both sides, just for a matter of "principle and honor."

This period of European history is relatively unknown and presents a major interest. Through the struggle between Prussia and Switzerland, one can observe that the Concert of Europe was no longer working as it did in 1815 and immediately afterwards. Increasing tensions and rivalries among the Great Powers were characteristic of the period. It is especially interesting to note the perceptible tension between Austria-Hungary and Prussia, in



search of a hegemonic role in the German-speaking area. One sees here the first inkling of the future conflict between them.

Switzerland, located in the heart of Europe, played a relatively peaceful role, not threatening its neighbors, not having the smallest spirit of conquest. This attitude probably contributed to calming the crisis.

On the internal level, Prussia celebrated the liberation of the political prisoners as a victory, which in fact did not bring real consequences: the stakes were not so important for Prussia, if analyzed dispassionately. Conversely, the consequences were fundamental for Switzerland. The country, facing a common threat, regained its unity which had been fragmented some ten years earlier, during the Sonderbund War (1847). This unity and the display of nationalism and patriotism, impressed the Great Powers and certainly contributed to the continued respect of Switzerland's neutrality in the future.

On the military level, all the lessons were not drawn: General Dufour noted the necessity of training the troops more frequently, and of engaging them in large-scale exercises, which he called the "prises d'armes." It would take many years before the political authorities decided to raise several divisions simultaneously for the purpose of maneuvers. Another war between two neighboring countries would be necessary to lead to the major military reforms of the 1870s.

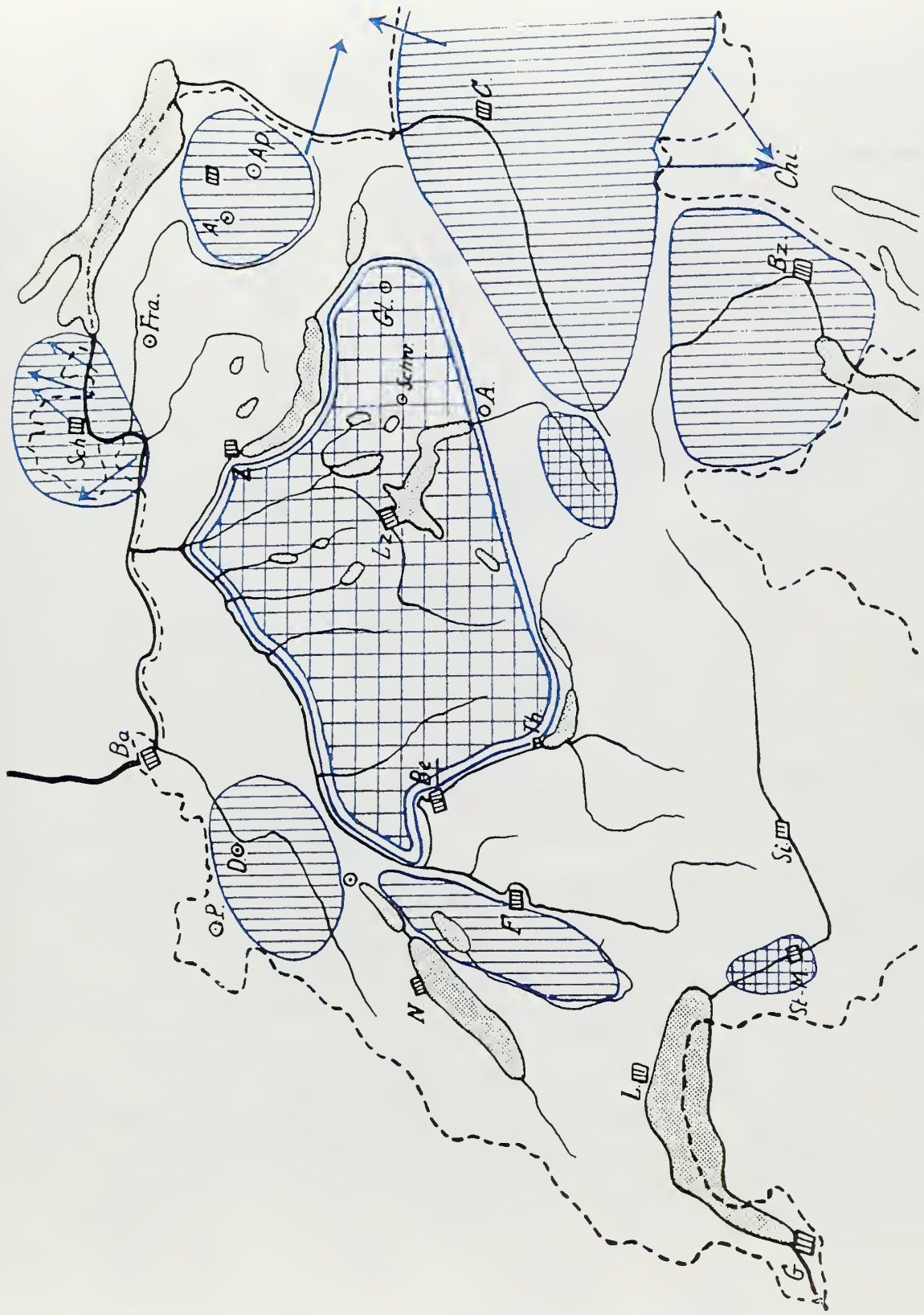
Finally, General Dufour's visions proved, once more, to have been right. However, this fact does not hold the same importance as the fact that Switzerland was unified in the willingness to defend its rights, neutrality and independence.

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## Appendix A: Strategic Defense of Switzerland. General Dufour's Ideas about the "Interior Defense and Forward Bastions."

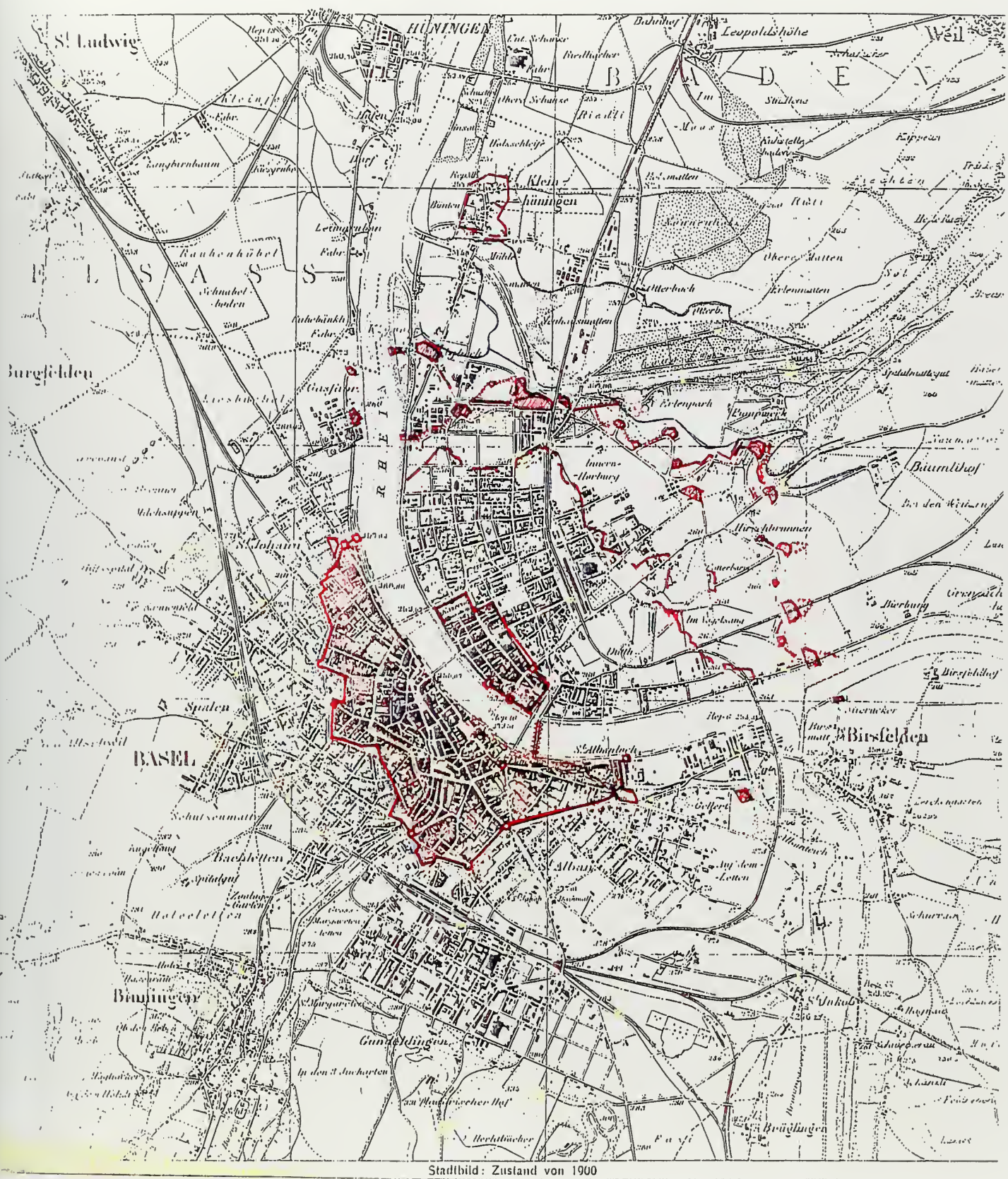


Source: Otto Weiss, *Gestalten und Gewalten der Schweizergeschichte*. Berne: A. Franke, 1939, map 13.





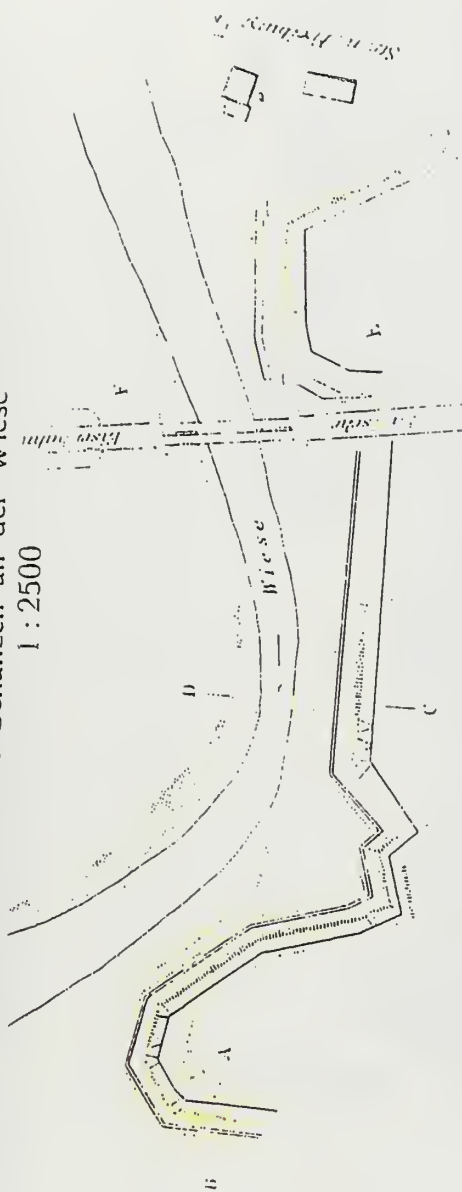
## Appendix B: Plan for the reinforcement of Basel



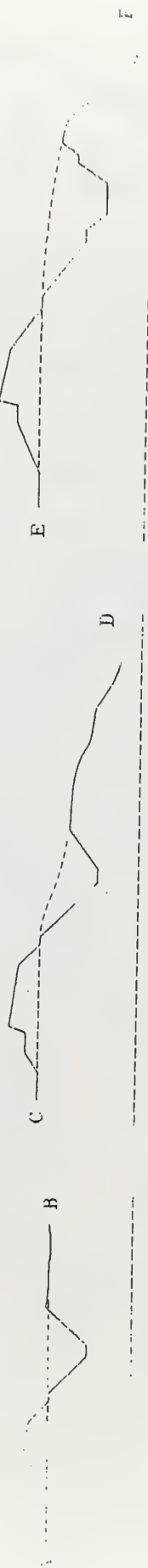
Source: Max de Diesbach, *Sonderbundskrieg und Neuenberger frage*, map appended.



# Die Schanzen an der Wiese 1:2500



## Profile 1:500



## Profil der inneren Linie der Aussenwerke 1:200



Ehemalige Befestigung der Stadt  
mit Mauer und Graben



Verhaue



Aeusserer Verteidigungslinie, Schanzen mit  
Verbindungswegen und Rückzugstrassen



Schiffbrücke und projektierte Schiffbrücke



Innere Linie der Aussenwerke zum Schutz  
Reservetruppen; Befestigung von Kleinfestungen

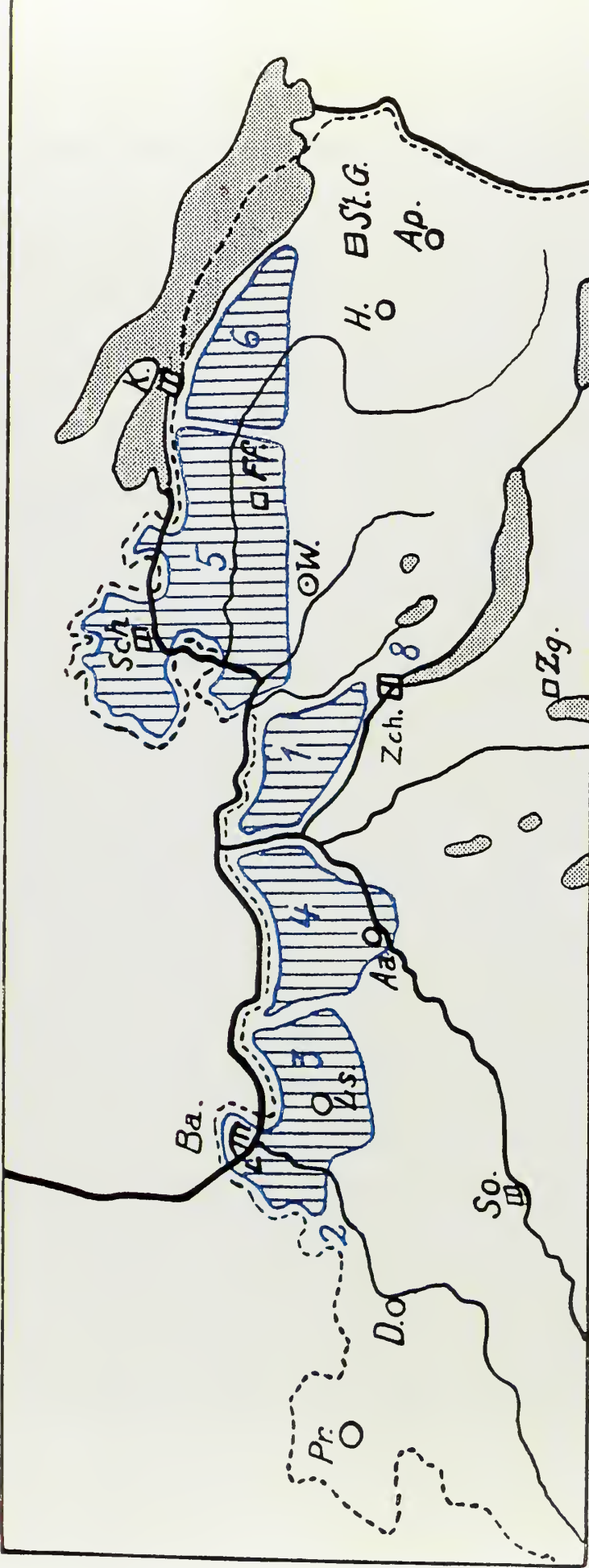
Unter Wasser gesetztes Vorgehänge, durch  
Stauung der Wiese







Appendix C: First Operational Plan



Source: Otto Weiss, *Gestalten und Gewalten der Schweizergeschichte*. Berne: A. Francke, 1939, map 9.





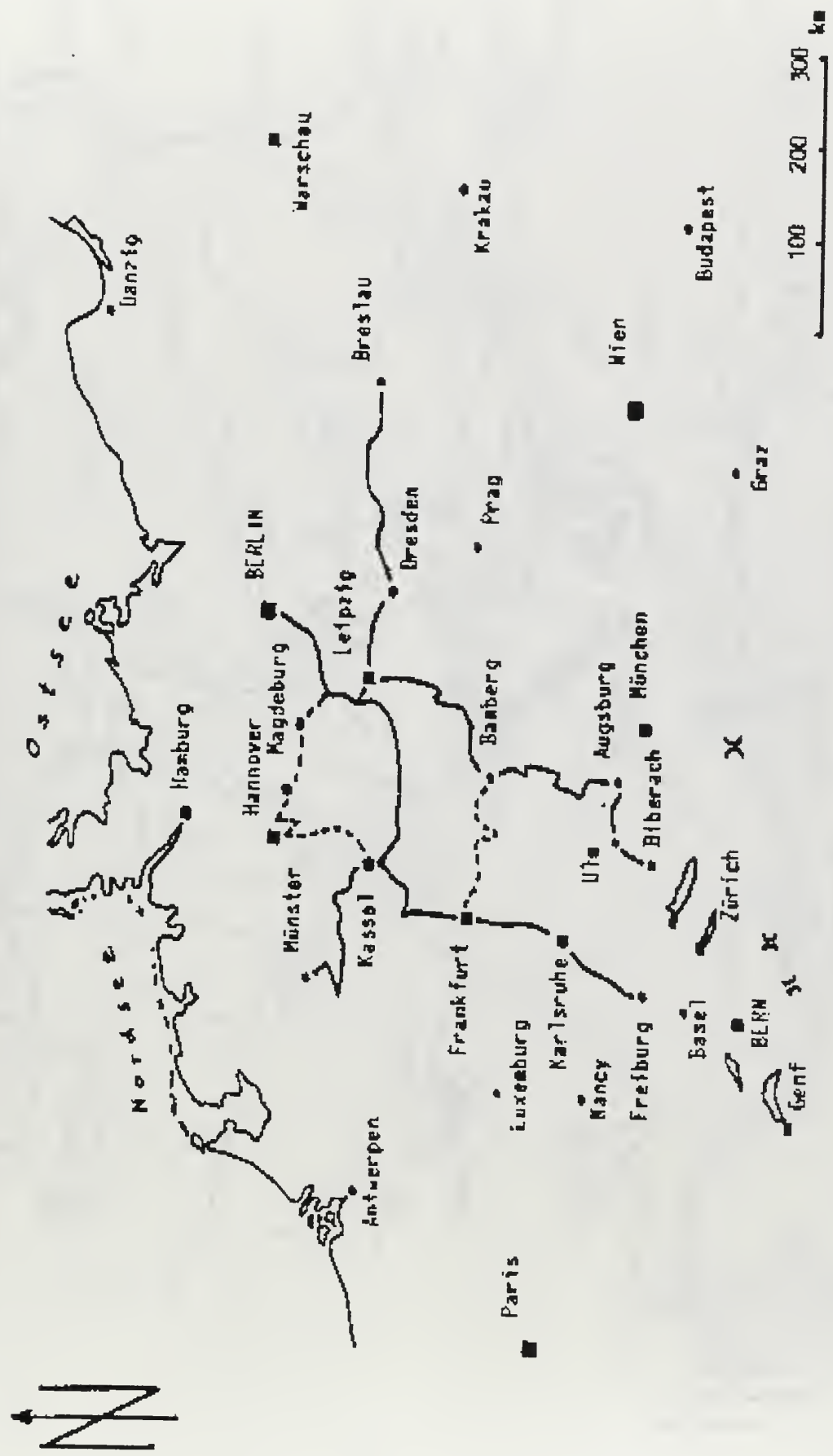
## Appendix D: Strength of Swiss Armed Forces Mobilized in January 1857

|                        |               |
|------------------------|---------------|
| Great General Staff    | 31            |
| Engineer Staff         | 460           |
| Artillery Staff        | 204           |
| Justice Staff          | 3             |
| Logistics Staff        | 2             |
| Medical Services Staff | 6             |
| First Division         | 4,696         |
| Second Division        | 20            |
| Third Division         | 7,599         |
| Fourth Division        | 5,074         |
| Fifth Division         | 6,852         |
| Sixth Division         | 4,482         |
| Seventh Division       | not mobilized |
| Eighth Division        | 20            |
| Ninth Division         | not mobilized |
| Artillery Reserve      | not mobilized |
| Cavalry Reserve        | not mobilized |
| Infantry Reserve       | not mobilized |
| -----                  |               |
| Total:                 | 29,449        |

Source: Guillaume-Henri Dufour, *Verzeichniss der verschiedenen Stäbe der im Jahre 1856/57 aufgestellten eidgenössischen Armee*. Berne: N.p., n.d., p. 61.

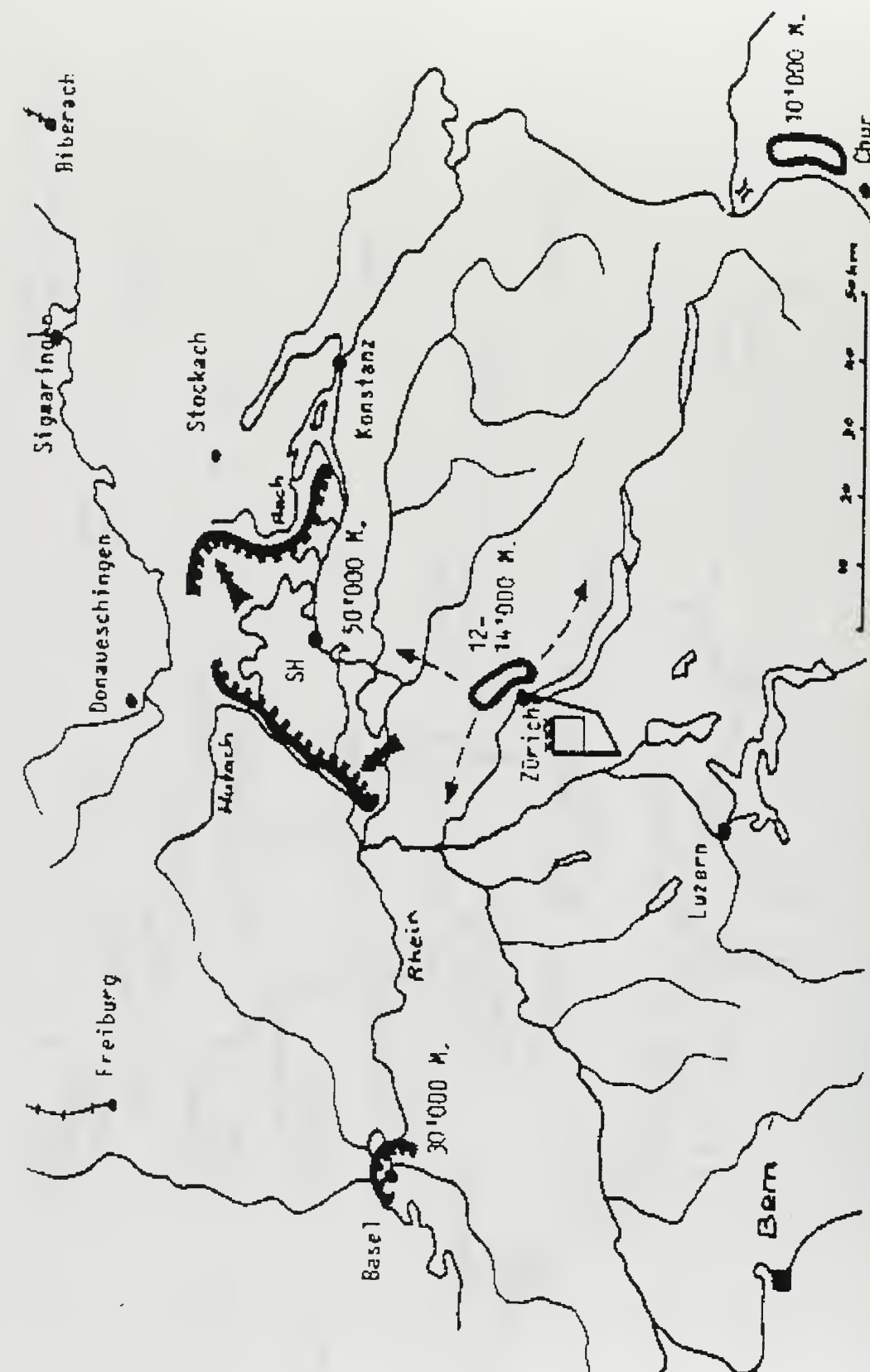


Appendix E: Sketch of the Railroad Lines Planned for Transporting Prussian Troops (drawn January 9, 1857 by the Prussian Railroad Department)



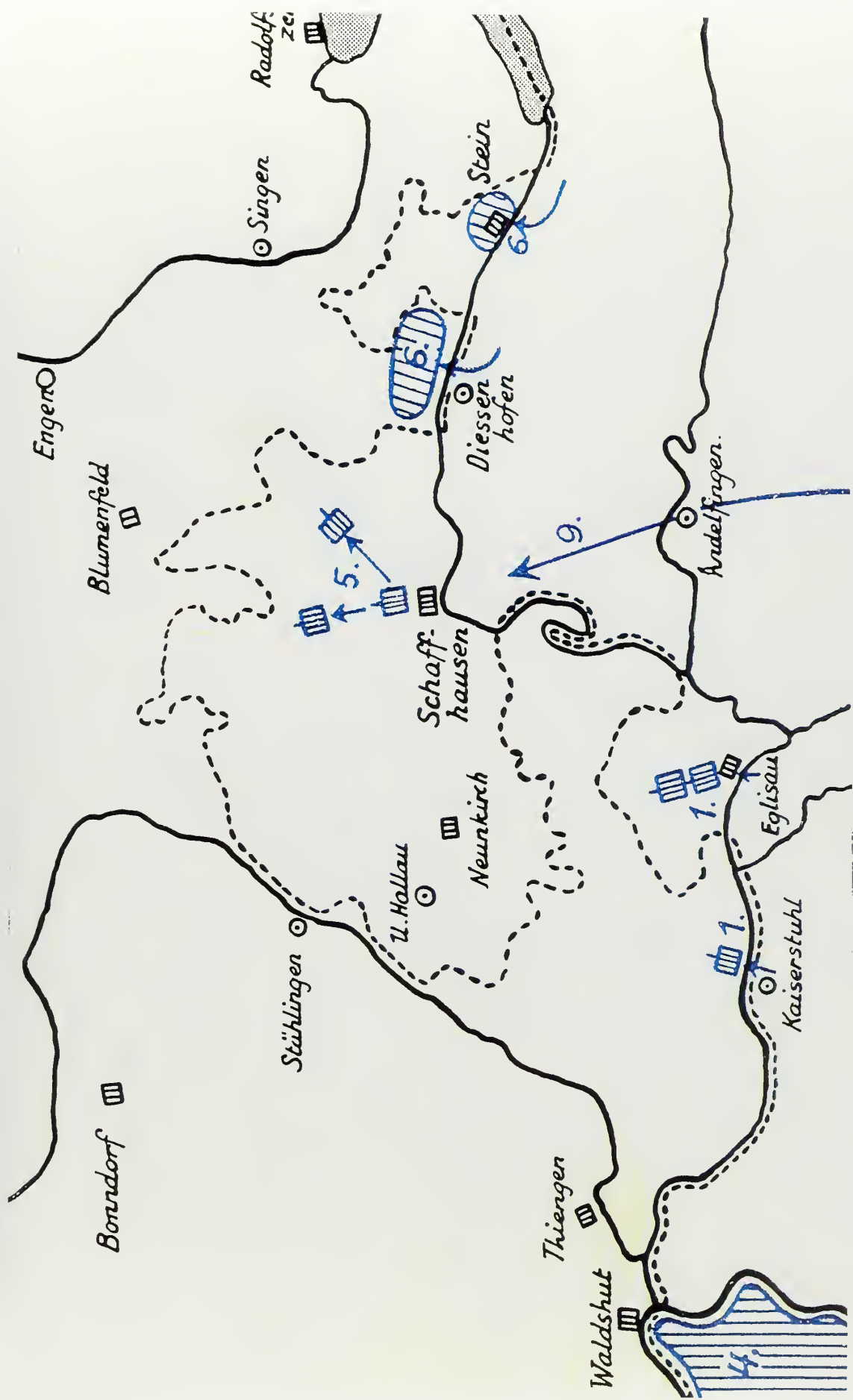
Source: Roland Beck, *Roulez Tambours*. Berne: Allgemeine Schweizerische Militär Zeitschrift, 1982, p. 99.

# Appendix F. General Dufour's Plan for a Defense North of the Rhine





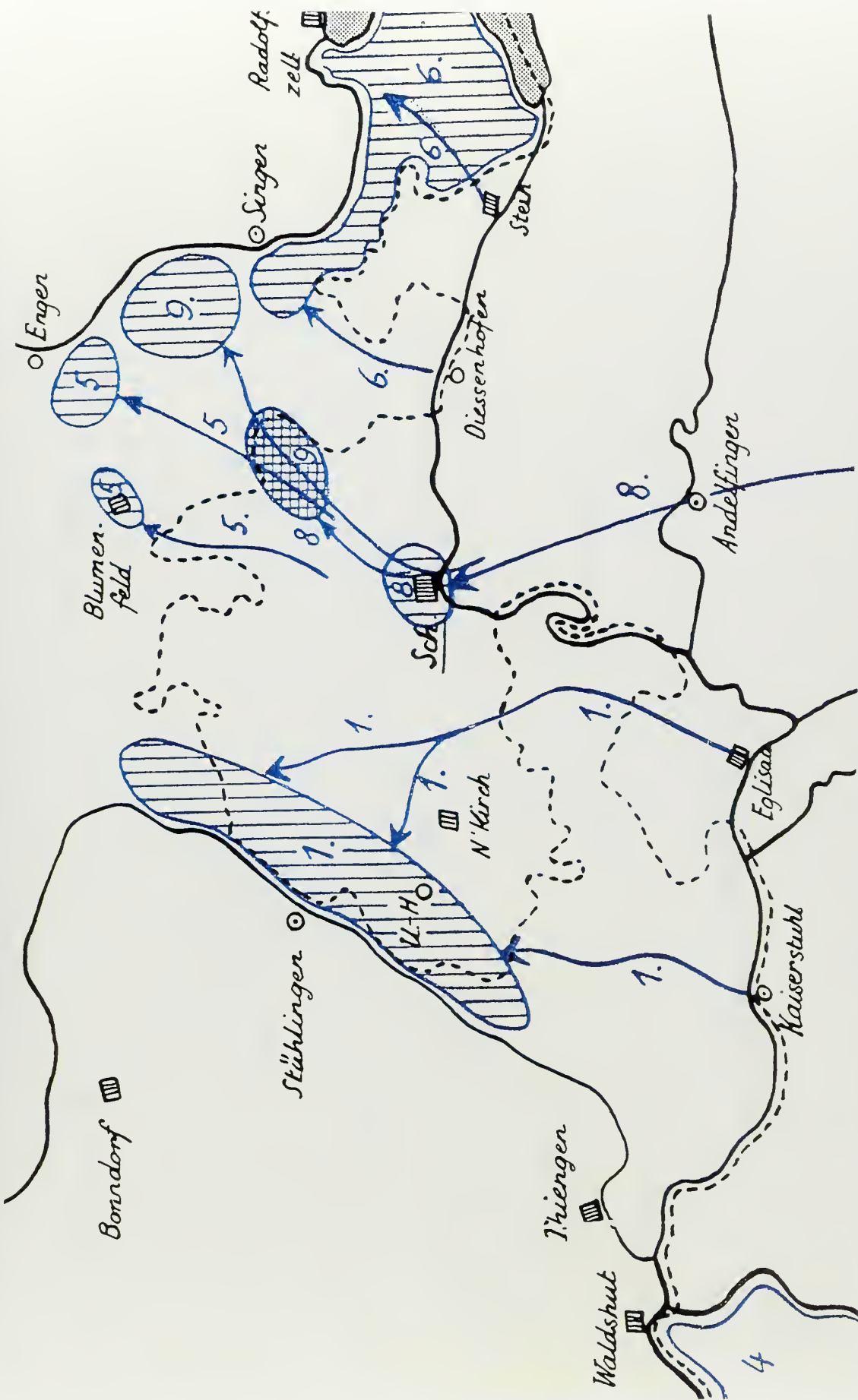
Appendix G: General Dufour's Plan for the First Day of the Offensive (Rhine Campaign of 1857)



Source: Otto Weiss, *Gestalten und Gewalten der Schweizergeschichte*. Berne: A. Franke, 1939, map 10. (scale is 1:250,000)



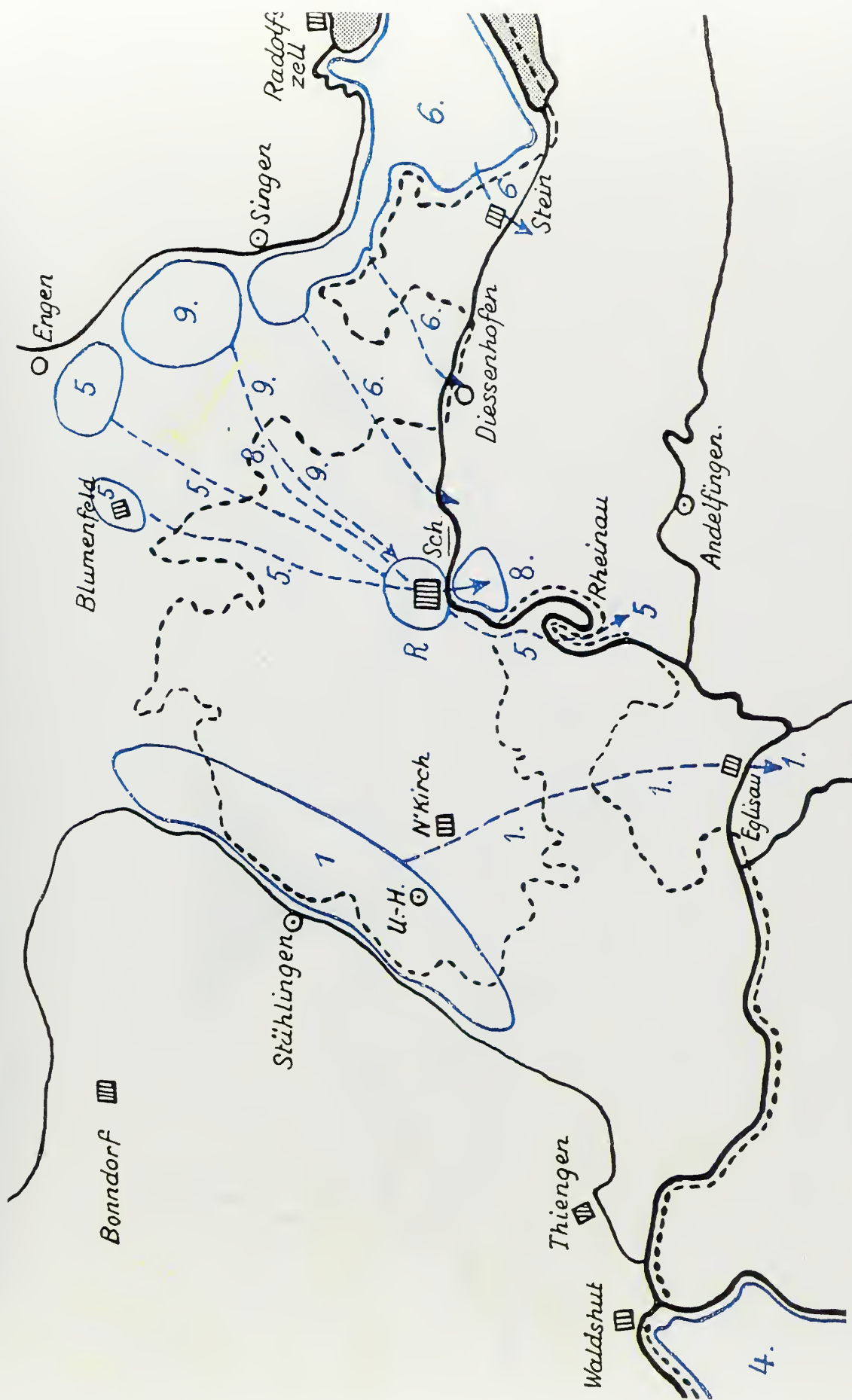
Appendix H: General Dufour's Plan for the Second and Third Days of the Offensive (Rhine Campaign of 1857)



Source: Otto Weiss, *Gestalten und Gewalten der Schweizergeschichte*. Berne: A. Franke, 1939, map 11. (scale is 1:250,000)



# Appendix I: General Dufour's Plan for a Possible Withdrawal (Rhine Campaign of 1857)

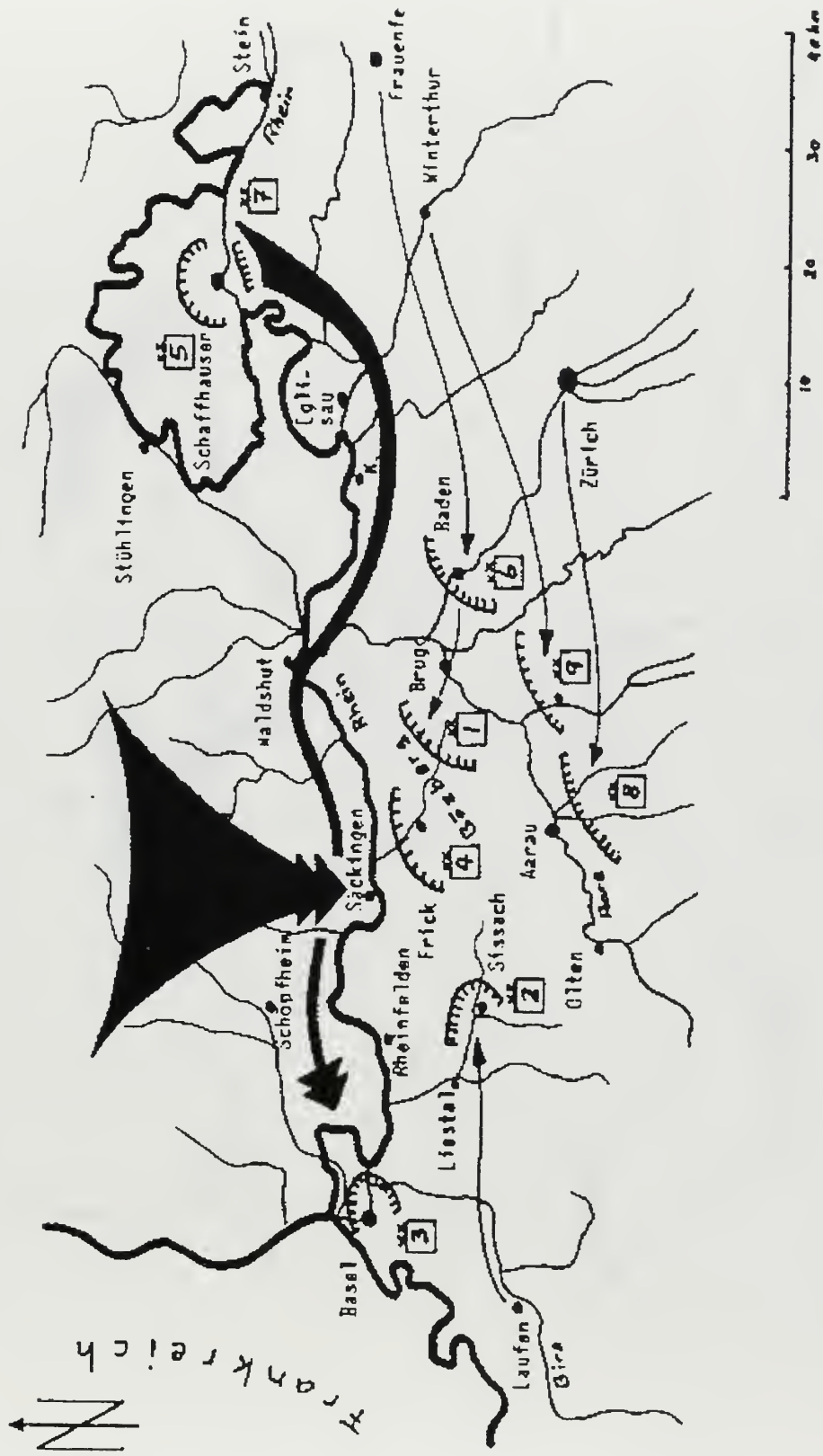


Source: Otto Weiss, *Gestalten und Gewalten der Schweizergeschichte*. Berne: A. Franke, 1939, map 12. (scale is 1:250,000)





# Appendix J: General Dufour's Plan to Oppose a Prussian Attack over Sädingen in the Direction of Berne



Source: Roland Beck, *Roulez Tambours*. Berne: Allgemeine Schweizerische Militärzeitschrift, 1982, p. 129.

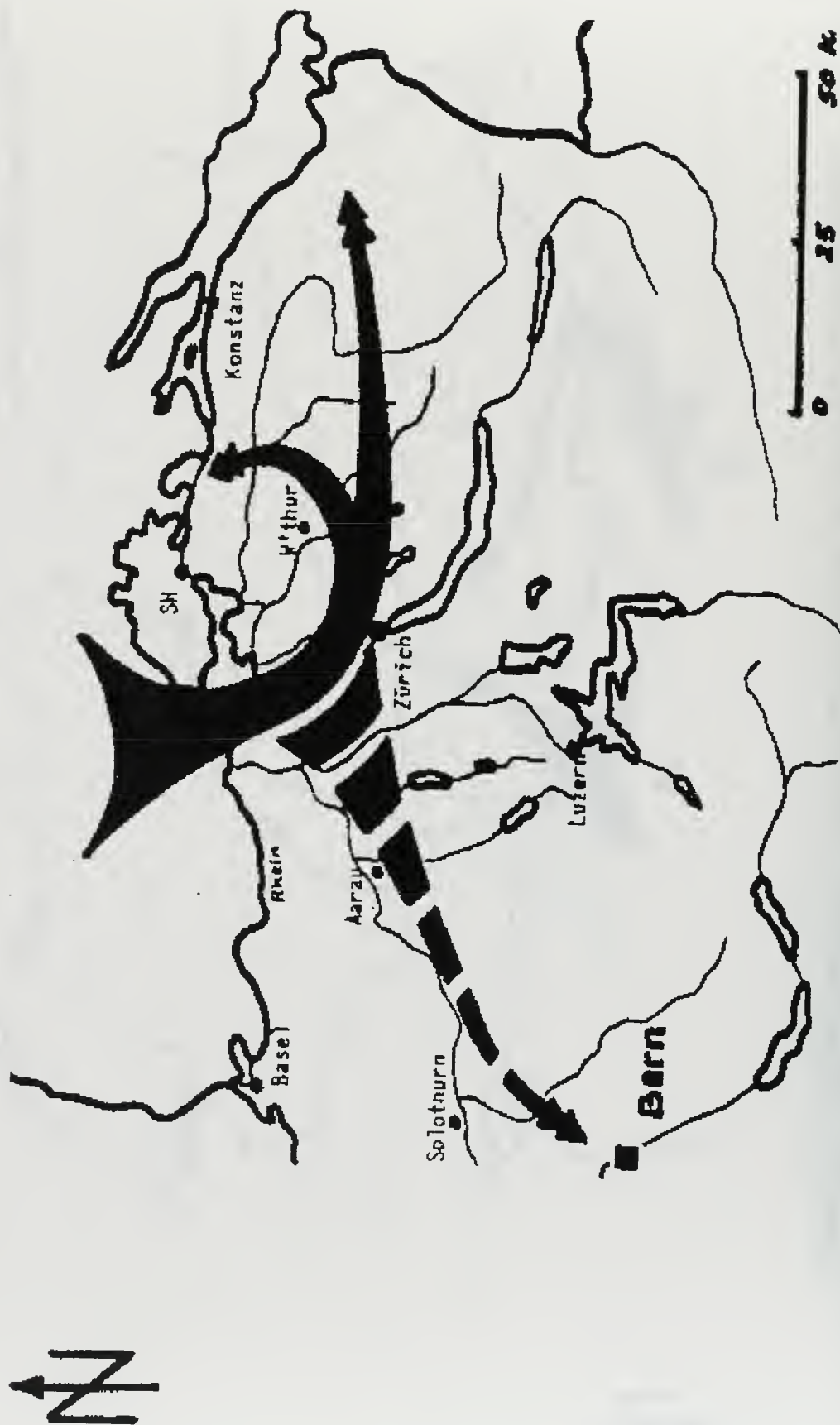


Appendix K: Prince Frederick Charles' Plan to Seize the Eastern Part of Switzerland



Source: Roland Beck, *Roulez Tambours*. Berne: Allgemeine Schweizerische Militärzeitschrift, 1982, p. 108.

# Appendix L: Prince Frederick Charles' Plan to Attack Switzerland



Source: Roland Beck, *Roulez Tambours*. Berne: Allgemeine Schweizerische Militärzeitschrift, 1982, p. 110.

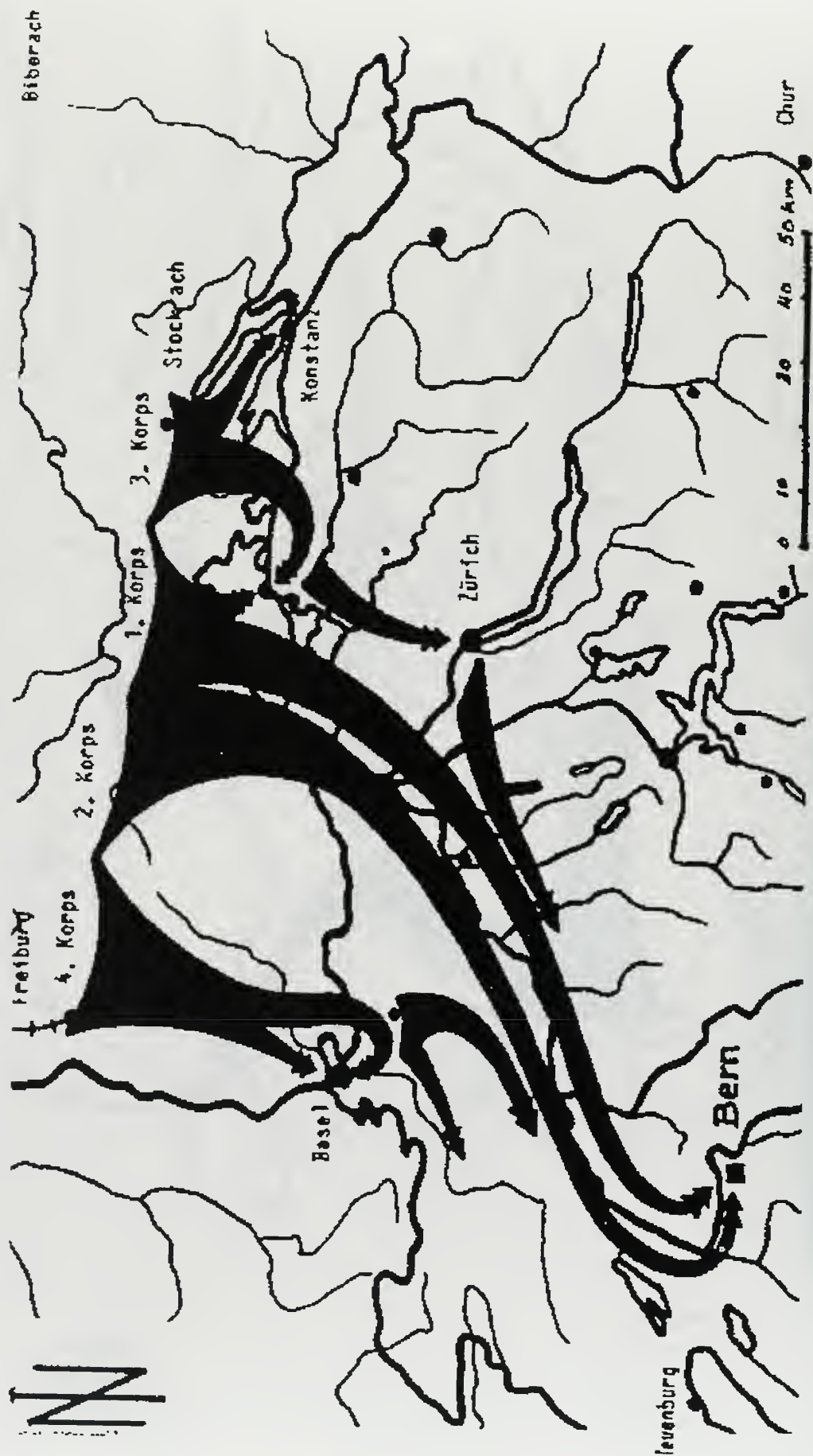


Appendix M: General von Reyher's Plan to Attack Switzerland



Source: Roland Beck, *Roulez Tambours*. Berne: Allgemeine Schweizerische Militärzeitschrift, 1982, p. 112.

# Appendix N: General von der Groeben's Plan to Attack Switzerland



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